

Atlantic City mulls delaying casino smoking ban

Atlantic City, New Jersey (AP) – With the economy crumbling and revenues plunging, Atlantic City is considering delaying the start of a total smoking ban at its 11 casinos.

The ban, which was approved in April after a year-and-a-half battle between casino workers and gambling hall operators, is set to take effect Oct. 15.

But even before it was approved, casino owners said they feared the ban would cost the industry millions of dollars in lost revenue and lead to job losses. That was before the Wall Street meltdown and economic crisis made things even worse.

The City Council is scheduled to consider delaying the ban at its meeting Wednesday night. The head of the largest casino workers union has suggested the smoking ban be delayed for a full year.

„Smoking is not healthy. Smoking kills people,“ said Bob McDevitt, president of Unite-Here Local 54, whose mother was a smoker and died from cancer. „So does job loss, unemployment and the threat of foreclosure. People will lose their ability to feed their families.“

But Jennifer Guillermain, an 18-year supervisor at Caesars Atlantic City, said many casino workers feel betrayed by the plan to postpone the ban. She said workers will turn out in force at Wednesday night’s meeting to try to convince the council to keep it in place.

„These greedy casino owners sit up in their smoke-free offices, and we’re the ones dying for their bonuses,“ she said. „Enough is enough.“

Guillermain, who has worked in the casino industry for 24 years, said she is waiting for a CAT scan of her lungs to determine if nodules detected there might be cancerous.

„I'm one of who-knows-how-many people here who don't know what's cooking inside them,“ she said.

The law passed in April allows Atlantic City's casinos to set up enclosed, ventilated smoking lounges that would be unstaffed. But smoking would be banned on the entire gambling floor.

For the past year and a half, Atlantic City casinos have operated under a partial smoking ban, in which smoking was restricted to no more than 25 percent of the casino floor.

City Councilman Marty Small acknowledged that many casino workers, particularly dealers and cocktail servers, are anxiously awaiting the start of the smoking ban.

„They were counting the days until Oct. 15,“ he said. „But one of the things no one could have predicted when we passed this was the crisis in the economy in this country. It's the worst since the Great Depression.

„We have to balance the health of the casino workers with the health of the casinos themselves,“ Small added. „They pay 80 percent of the taxes here. If one or two casinos close, that comes back on us as taxpayers who have to make up for those taxes.“

Donald Trump has been the most vocal opponent of a smoking ban, and has urged legal action to block it. During a ribbon-cutting ceremony last week for the second hotel tower at the Trump Taj Mahal Casino resort, he predicted the ban would worsen an already bad economic climate in Atlantic City, and called on the council to reconsider the ban.

„The smoking ban will take tens of millions of dollars of

taxes away, will take tens of millions of dollars of aid away to senior citizens," Trump said. „In the last month, I've had 15 calls from friends saying they can no longer come to Atlantic City. I say, 'Why?' They say, 'because we smoke.'

„I think the smoking ban will do more to hurt Atlantic City in terms of dollars, income, financings, everything, than any single thing I've seen over the last 15 or 20 years," he said. „It's going to be a disaster."

Joe Corbo, president of the Casino Association of New Jersey, declined comment on the possible delay of the ban.

Larry Mullin, president of the Borgata Hotel Casino and Spa said most, if not all, of Atlantic City's casinos favor delaying it.

„If the market weren't facing these economic conditions, we wouldn't be asking for this," he said. „But we'd like to delay it for as long as these conditions exist."