

# Smoke to return to casino patrons' eyes in Atlantic City

Atlantic City – Casino patrons will take their last breathe of fresh air on a city gaming floor Nov. 16 after City Council lifted a smoking ban Monday that went into effect 12 days ago.

The 5-4 vote overturned council's unanimous decision in April to ban smoking at all 11 Atlantic City casinos, instead choosing to revisit the ban in a year with hopes that the country's economic crisis has subsided.

The measure was immediately signed into law by outgoing Mayor Scott Evans in his office five floors above council chambers.

But the city could not get the six-vote super majority needed to pass a resolution immediately implementing the delay. That measure failed despite having another 5-4 majority in favor. City Clerk Rosemary Adams said the delay would go into effect in 20 days.

Councilman Bruce Ward, the panel's legislative force behind the smoking ban, said he considered the outcome a local example of another government bailout for big corporations.

„We really struggled here,“ Ward told a packed room at City Hall, referring to Council's deliberations. „If you want to have some frustration, direct it at the CEOs of this country and the casino executives (here).“

Ward said casino heads could have avoided the smoking ban in the first place when council approved a compromise measure last year, banning smoking on only 75 percent of the gaming floors. However, most casinos failed to comply, and a full smoking ban followed with a deadline of Oct. 15.

As the date approached, council was flooded with calls lobbying to delay the ban, in light of the economy and dwindling casino revenue.

The resort's gaming halls suffered their biggest monthly revenue decline ever last month. Casino executives project the smoking ban would deal another blow. But Council's tardiness to vote for a delay allowed the ban to go into effect between the ordinance's first and second readings.

Harrah's Entertainment Inc. and Trump Entertainment Resorts Inc., Atlantic City's two largest gaming operators, said they both have suffered a 10 percent decline in business at their casinos since the smoking ban began Oct. 15. The New Jersey Casino Control Commission said gaming revenue fell 19.5 percent for the entire industry over a seven-day span ending last Friday.

„It's clearly been impacting the last two weeks. I think with the last weekend, there was more of an impact than the previous weekend, as people are clearly understanding that they can't smoke," said Mark Juliano, chief executive officer of Trump Entertainment, operator of three casinos.

J. Carlos Tolosa, who oversees the four Atlantic City casinos owned by Harrah's Entertainment, said gamblers are spending less money on the casino floor because they are spending more time in the smoking lounges or smoking outside.

But Janice Walton, a dealer at Caesars Atlantic City, said she has seen no change since the casinos went smoke-free.

„We are not telling them they can't smoke, we're only telling them where they can smoke," she said. She added that the smoking patrons make up just a fraction of the customer base.

„Do the casinos want to cater to 4 or 5 percent, or do they want to cater to 96 percent?" she said.

Vince Rennich, a former employee at Tropicana Casino and Resort who attributes his lung cancer to second-hand smoke, said Monday was not a total loss. He insisted anti-smoking supporters scored a victory by witnessing a ban for more than a month.

„It just wasn't the victory we wanted," he said. „But the casinos (originally) never thought it would get this far. At least we got to see what we wanted.“

Rennich demonstrated the change in approach some anti-smoking activists took Monday after failed pleas to council members earlier this month. He accused Councilman Marty Small, a supporter of the delay, of a conflict of interest in voting on casino issues. He noted Small has rented out space at city casinos for his annual „Small Ball“ parties.

Small calmly discounted the claim that there was a conflict.

„I understand what you're trying to do," Small said. „What you're saying is wrong. Whoever fed you your information should have done their homework.“

City Council President William Marsh said the allegation was not necessary, but noted the meeting was more pleasant than previous votes on casino smoking.

But City Hall was still filled with activists promoting both sides of the issue Monday. Some opinions were easily distinguishable.

Dozens of United Auto Workers members supporting the ban chanted „Save our lives!“ as council members took their seat at the start of the meeting. Meanwhile, workers from Local 54 of UNITE-HERE, who support the ban, shouted „Save our jobs!“