

Casinos, workers are dealt bad hands

Things have never been this bad for Atlantic City's casinos.

Revenue is plunging at a record-breaking pace. Nearly 3,100 jobs have been lost in a year.

Things have gotten so bad at Atlantic City's gambling halls that the head of the local casino association recently urged workers not to discuss the economy with customers.

And it's only going to get worse: A new slots parlor in Bethlehem, Pa., is opening next month that's sure to draw northern New Jersey customers who used to go to Atlantic City.

The latest blow came Thursday when statistics from the state Casino Control Commission showed another record-setting decline in the amount of money won from gamblers in March. The 19.4 percent decline shattered the previous record of 19.2 percent that was set just a month earlier.

„As a longtime resident of the Atlantic City area, seeing these types of numbers month after month is depressing,” said Joe Weinert, a casino analyst with Spectrum Gaming Group. „I have seen good friends lose their jobs as a result of this prolonged slump, and many others are walking on eggshells at their jobs.”

Those who still have their jobs, that is.

Since the beginning of the year, Atlantic City's 11 casinos have eliminated 1,270 jobs. And since March 2008, 3,092 casino workers have been let go.

The total now stands at 37,315, down from a high of 49,123 in 1997. Less than three years ago, the city had more than 45,000 casino workers.

Nick Garofalo was laid off in January from his job as a lighting technician at Caesars Atlantic City.

„It was put to us that they were not making the money they thought they would because of the recession, and they were just hunkering down,“ he said. „It’s been kind of tough since then.“

Garofalo is studying for his electrician’s license, and still works sporadic part-time jobs at the casinos.

„Not every (casino) wants 100 guys on the payroll, but when Janet Jackson comes into town with 14 tractor trailers, then they need people,“ he said.

Still, it’s a far cry from what Garofalo once expected to be a permanent full-time career.

„It seems like in the entertainment industry, and especially in Atlantic City, it’s getting harder and harder to just do your job,“ he said.

It’s hard for casinos, too. The three casinos owned by Trump Entertainment Resorts are in Chapter 11 bankruptcy, the Tropicana Casino and Resort is about to be sold in a bankruptcy court auction expected to be authorized on Wednesday, and Resorts Atlantic City, the nation’s first casino outside Las Vegas, is fighting off a foreclosure attempt by its lender.

Atlantic City is in the third year of a revenue decline that started soon after slots parlors opened in the Philadelphia suburbs in late December 2006. Since then, a slots parlor at Yonkers Raceway in New York has cut into the northern New Jersey/New York market that once had little choice but to come to Atlantic City.

And next month, Sands Bethlehem, another new slots parlor that will also offer electronic versions of Atlantic City’s table

games, is opening in Pennsylvania.

„This property is ideally situated to siphon off customers from Atlantic City’s number one feeder market of northern New Jersey,” Weinert said.

„This obviously is going to be another significantly depressed year for Atlantic City,” he said. „At this point, its best hope to turn back the negative tide is for the stock market to continue to climb – making people feel better about the economy – and for hot weather that will compel people to drive to the shore this summer.“