

Ohio casinos: Smoke while you gamble

Written by Administrator

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Construction along Reading Road for the new smoking and gambling area. (Photo: The Enquirer/Alexander Coolidge)

Smokers could soon be placing bets at Cincinnati's Horseshoe – the first of three Ohio casinos adding slot machines in smoking areas.

Ohio's smoking ban has been seen as a competitive advantage to three riverboat casinos in southeast Indiana, where smoking is allowed. Now, casinos in Cincinnati, Columbus and Toledo want to install slot machines in designated smoking areas while keeping their main gaming floors smoke-free.

Cincinnati's dominant casino plans to install about 150 slot machines and other gaming devices on a nearly 10,000-square-foot smoking deck under construction along Reading Road. The casino is awaiting final regulatory approvals, but plans for the addition clearly show it wants gaming devices in the new area.

"This fall, pending regulatory approval, we will introduce a new concept to the market that combines an upscale bar with slot machine gaming and smoking on an outdoor patio, which will enable guests to continue to enjoy the casino experience in a weather-protected space," Horseshoe officials said in a statement.

Regulators with the Ohio Casino Control Commission say they are reviewing Horseshoe's proposal and will approve it as long as it meets all the safety, security and surveillance requirements imposed on traditional gaming floor areas.

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"It's a straightforward proposal. We view this as an expansion of a gaming space," said Matt Schuler, executive director of the commission.

The casinos' move is not unprecedented. All but one of five racinos (horse racetracks with video slot machines) throughout Ohio have at least a few slots in smoking areas. But the scope of Horseshoe's gambling area for smokers is much larger than anything in the state.

Horseshoe could generate an additional \$10 million in annual gambling revenue if the casino adds the slot machines and they generate the property's average \$175 daily unit revenue. One-third of casino gambling revenue is returned to the state in taxes.

Officials with rival Hollywood Casinos in Columbus and Toledo are also working through the details of installing slot machines on their smoking decks.

"We have customers who like to smoke, and this is a way to meet customer demand," said Bob Tenenbaum, an Ohio spokesman with Hollywood's parent Penn National Gaming Inc.

Ohio casinos – like any business in the state – are prohibited from allowing customers to light up except in designated and well-ventilated outdoor patios.

Until now, Ohio casinos have kept their slot machines on their smoke-free gaming floors. Tenenbaum said Penn National pledged during the 2009 constitutional amendment that legalized Ohio casinos not to seek an exemption from the state's smoking ban.

Despite its no-smoking policy, Cincinnati's Horseshoe has slowly become the region's No. 1 gambling destination – pulling in more revenue each month but February than former champ Hollywood Casino Lawrenceburg, which is now No. 2. Offering smokers the option to light up while they gamble could broaden Horseshoe's lead in Cincinnati's crowded gambling market that also includes two racinos and two other Indiana riverboats.

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Ohio's racinos, however, also compete with the state's casinos, and limited gaming in smoking areas appears to provide an advantage.

Statewide racino revenue has more than doubled to \$53.4 million during the first seven months of 2014 as new facilities have opened, while combined casino revenues have ebbed 5.5 percent to \$68 million.

Locally, Belterra Park Gaming & Entertainment Center in Anderson Township doesn't offer smokers the option to play while they light up, but Miami Valley Gaming racino in TurtleCreek Township has about 20 machines on a smoking patio.

Hollywood's two new racinos in Dayton and Youngstown will have slot machines in smoking areas when they open within weeks.

Cleveland's Horseshoe Casino is the only full-fledged Ohio casino that doesn't seem poised to offer gambling options to customers while they smoke. Located in a historic building, the facility has limited space.

Smokers aren't ignored in northeast Ohio, however: ThistleDown racino's Slush smoking and gambling patio in suburban Cleveland is set to quadruple the gaming, from 32 video slots to 129 in an expansion planned for late this year.

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