



## Health Advocates Bemoan Decision to Allow Smoking at Revel

Casino's decision to change course disappoints supporters of statewide smoking ban

By Andrew Kitchenman, May 30, 2013

When Revel casino opened last year, part of its marketing strategy to attract families included promoting itself as the only Atlantic City casino where smoking was not allowed.

But a year of disappointing revenue has led to bankruptcy, new ownership – and now a reversal of the no-smoking policy, a disappointing decision for health advocates.

"It's a setback," said Dr. Fred M. Jacobs, the former state health and senior services commissioner.

Jacobs and other anti-smoking activists say last weekend's lifting of the smoking ban will harm casino workers, expose patrons with breathing disorders to health risks and likely have little long-term effect on Revel's financial fate, which will depend on how well the casino is managed.

Jacobs noted that neighboring states have had successful casinos with smoke-free interiors. Anti-smoking campaigners would like to reverse an exemption in a 2006 state law that bans smoking in all public places except for casinos and racing simulcast facilities. A separate Atlantic City ordinance limits smoking to 25 percent of gaming floors and requires that area to be enclosed, but the local measure isn't enforced.

"It's not only misguided from a business standpoint and a setback from the public health standpoint but it's a clear danger to the workers who are exposed to this hazard on a daily basis," said Jacobs, whose medical specialty focuses on respiratory diseases.

Revel's policy reversal came after a disastrous first year, which saw the facility rank among the lowest of Atlantic City's casinos in gaming revenue at a time when the city continued to lose customers to casinos in other states. Revel officials didn't respond to a request for comment on the policy change yesterday.

Jacobs cited an **estimate** that 50,000 Americans die yearly from exposure to second-hand smoke).

"The casino workers who work in an area with a lot of cigarette smoke who are not smokers are assuming the risk of being cigarette smokers," Jacobs said.

Jacobs expressed concern that workers who don't want to work in areas with smoking will lose their jobs. "It's a throwback to the working conditions in Victorian England," he said.

Jacobs serves as board president of Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy (GASP), which advocates for controls on smoking.

GASP Executive Director Karen Blumenfeld said Revel's decision was a mistake. She noted that most adults in the state don't smoke. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation analysis of federal statistics, only 16.8 percent of New Jersey adults smoke, leaving the state tied with Hawaii for the third-lowest smoking rate of any state, trailing only Utah and California.

Blumenfeld added that surveys suggest that 70 percent of people who smoke would like to quit. She noted that casinos in New York, Delaware, Maryland and Ohio are smoke-free. Smoking is allowed in Pennsylvania's casinos.

"If the casino industry thought that being smoke-free would hurt their business, then why are they vying for these licenses?" Blumenfeld said, adding that her criticism would apply to all Atlantic City casinos, not just Revel.

Blumenfeld said Revel's addition of smoking is out-of-step with state officials' vision for expanding the city's core audience beyond gamblers making daytrips. She said there's also a disconnect between allowing smoking inside Atlantic City casinos while the city government banned it in public parks and playgrounds.

"We were all hoping that there was going to be a family-friendly marketing approach to Atlantic City," she said.

Casino analyst Steve Norton said he originally thought Revel's smoke-free strategy had a chance of working, as a way of differentiating the facility from its 11 rivals.

"I thought that might be a smart move," said Norton, an Atlantic City veteran who served as the vice president of Resorts when it became the state's first casino in 1978.

But Revel's owners made a series of mistakes, beginning with the decision to build a major casino at a time when the city's gambling revenue was collapsing. They compounded that error by building too many rooms, then charging too much for midweek stays after the casino opened, Norton said.

Norton said a good way for casinos to limit exposure to second-hand smoke is to have well-ventilated smoking areas and allowing only employees who smoke to work in those areas.

A bill **S-1795/A-343** introduced last year in the Legislature would end the casinos' exemption from the smoking ban, but it hasn't been scheduled for committee hearings. While the legislation has sponsors from both parties, it didn't draw sponsors from South Jersey's Democratic contingent.

<http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/13/05/29/health-advocates-bemoan-decision-to-allowing-smoking-at-revel/>