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Will more casinos embrace non-smokers?

Posted by Brian J. Cantwell

If you saw our Sunday story about visiting Suquamish and the new tribal museum there, you might have noticed we didn't say much about the casino.

Clearwater Casino is operated by the Suquamish Tribe. (photo by Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times)

There was a reason for that. If you've gotten accustomed to breathing fresh air thanks to Washington state's ban on smoking in indoor public places, you might be happy to stay out of tribal casinos that aren't covered by that prohibition.

I'm a non-smoker — or can we just say "fresh-air breather"? — and I wasn't inside the Suquamish Tribe's Clearwater Casino for 15 minutes before my head started pounding, just like I remember from the bad old days when people smoked in the back of planes and buses. I needed a shower when I got back to my hotel room. That made it hard to recommend visiting the casino.

Surprisingly few people were actually smoking inside the place, but it only takes a few — plus the fact that the smell penetrates walls and furnishings like skunk spray gets into a dog's coat. The relatively small corner of the casino reserved for non-smokers was jammed, but even those people didn't get fresh air: No doors or partitions separated them from the rest of the room and its tobacco fug.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention numbers say 79 percent of Americans are non-smokers, up from 57 percent in 1965. (In King County, it's a breathtaking — or breath-giving? — 88 percent.) Some tribes, such as the Muckleshoots, have responded in recent years by opening a separate casino for non-smokers. So it makes sense to ask: When will more casinos turn the tables in favor of non-smokers, to match the change in the population?

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