

Smoking concerns aired | POLL

Lighting up in casinos should be banned, advocates say

By Bryan Corbin
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INDIANAPOLIS — Exposure to secondhand tobacco smoke in casinos make them unhealthy places to work, according to anti-smoking advocates who on Tuesday urged Indiana legislators to ban smoking in all public places. But the trustee in charge of Casino Aztar in Evansville said casinos should be exempt from such bans.

Lobbying efforts by smoking opponents are bolstered by a study by anti-smoking advocates and Purdue University researchers of air quality in all 11 Indiana casinos. It found the average level of fine-particle indoor air pollution was 14 times higher than outdoor levels. The level also exceeds the Environmental Protection Agency standards for 24-hour or annual exposure.

Neil Zimmerman, a professor of industrial hygiene at Purdue who conducted the study, said student researchers posing as customers visited each of the Indiana casinos once, on varying days and times, with an air-sampling device to record air-quality readings.

Zimmerman and the Indiana Academy of Family Physicians provided an average total for all the casinos for their level of indoor air pollution for gaming areas, but they declined to provide the results by individual casino or identify which casino had the worst air quality.

"The data illustrate these (casinos) are dangerous and unhealthy places to work," said Tim Filler of the Indiana Campaign for Smokefree Air. Filler and Zimmerman contended that designated nonsmoking areas within casinos do not shield patrons and workers from dirty air.

The research comes as Rep. Charlie Brown, D-Gary, said he is introducing a bill in the Legislature that would ban smoking statewide in all public places, and it would not exempt casinos. Brown said workers in places such as restaurants, bars and casinos deserve the same protections against secondhand smoke as other employees.

If such a ban became law, it would affect Casino Aztar. Robert "Tom" Dingman, the trustee appointed by the Indiana Gaming Commission to run Aztar during its ownership transition, said similar casino smoking bans in other states have resulted in decreases of up to 25 percent in gaming revenues. Patrons take their

recreational dollars elsewhere, he said. "It's a reality of the business that people, it seems, who are smokers are also casino players. I don't know why that is," Dingman said. He noted Aztar has a designated nonsmoking gaming area that draws less business.

"Performance of those slots (in that area) is significantly less than similar games at (smoking) locations in the casino — 30 percent less," Dingman said. Dingman prefers that the Legislature exempt casinos statewide if smoking ban legislation were adopted this session.

The EPA says it's healthy to have up to 35 micrograms per cubic meter of fine particulate matter in the air over 24 hours. But the study found the average level of fine particulate matter in casino gambling areas was 159 micrograms per cubic meter.

Seven of the 11 casinos measured had nonsmoking areas, and the average level in those areas was 48 micrograms per cubic meter. A gambler at Indiana casinos would exceed the EPA's 24-hour health limits within an average of just four hours, Zimmerman said.

Cigarette and cigar smoke bothers casino worker Karena Walters, who said it's not fair that many workers in public places are protected by nonsmoking ordinances, but she is not covered.

Walters, who declined to identify where she works, said she often is asked why she stays in the job if the smoke bothers her so much.

"It's hard, especially nowadays with the economy the way it is, to find a job," she said, adding that she earns good wages. "I don't feel that I should have to choose between my job and my health."

Dingman said Aztar has fans at all table games to circulate air, and the casino is looking at upgrading its heating-ventilation-cooling system.

"Every casino has an obligation — and Casino Aztar is no different — that you can't eliminate it completely, but you can mitigate it by having modern HVAC systems that do a better job of filtering," Dingman said. "It is probably not completely eliminated.

"There's a righteous cause on one side that has an impact on the other side. That's why it's a political issue." Disagreeing with assertions that casinos would lose revenue if smoking were banned inside, Brown countered that they might attract more nonsmoking customers.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.