

Smoking ban at Win-River to be lifted

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REDDING, Calif. - Less than a year after it became the second casino in California to bar smoking, Win-River Resort & Casino is calling off the ban because of overwhelming customer complaints.

“They want the option back ... our customers were really letting us know,” Public Relations Director Maria Orozco said of the casino’s customers. “But we had to try.”

Smoking will be back Sunday, Orozco said. It was already prohibited in some parts of the casino — such as its restaurant — but March’s ban affected the game floor at Win-River that houses the slot machines many people go there to use.

At the time, casino officials said they wanted to protect their employees and customers from secondhand smoke, citing studies they’d conducted indicating only about 10 percent of them actually used tobacco.

But Orozco said the complaints have been steady since the ban took effect, and giving customers what they want is a “business decision.”

“Business is business ... from my perspective, our customers want to go to a competitor who is offering something that they can’t have here, we’ve got to revisit what’s not working,” Orozco said. “We held out for that year; it was important for us to at least try it.”

General Manager Gary Hayward said he’s disappointed and surprised so many people were against the health-conscious move.

“I kind of expected it to work out differently than it did,” Hayward said. “I was bummed out; I’m still bummed out, because I personally don’t like smoke ... and overall, I think it was a good move (to ban it).”

Hayward had been working to implement a ban about three years before it finally happened, he said, so he's surprised all the studies — including the one saying only 10 percent of customers at the casino smoked — turned out to be misleading.

“That 10 percent number ... didn't factor in the overall group,” he said. “I think it was something we might have overlooked.”

Hayward said he isn't sure how many complaints he got and, therefore, an updated estimate on how many casino customers actually smoke, but there was a persistent stream of unsolicited complaints all year long. And those complaints led to a noticeable boon in business for nearby casinos that still allowed smoking, Hayward said, noting that he'd see some of his customers there when he visited.

“When it comes down to it, it's like anything else — if it's not convenient for people, they're not going to bother with it, and I think we took the convenience away for that customer,” he said.

The good news for non-smokers, Orozco and Hayward said, is that the ban brought to light the need for improvement in health protections at the casino, even if smoking is allowed again. Plans are underway for a new ventilation system and glass partitions to shield those who don't smoke from those who do.

“That's exactly why we need to revisit the ventilation, the air quality,” Orozco said, noting how employee and customer health is still important to them.

Hayward said about 30 percent of the casino will now be smoke-friendly, compared to about 50 percent pre-ban, so it's still an improvement.

“The nonsmoker has definitely more space than the smoker overall,” he said, noting that roughly 200 games will be in a non-smoking area.

Narinder Dhaliwal, director of the California Clean Air Project, commended Win-River for at least trying out a ban.

Like casino officials, she noted that reducing smoking areas overall — even without an all-out ban — is better than nothing.

“They have still increased the nonsmoking areas, so that’s still a plus,” said Dhaliwal, who worked with casino officials to implement the ban. “It’s a credit to (them) to actually implement this policy and ... think about the health of their employes and the health of their patrons. And as far as what all feedback they’ll get, I think that just remains to be seen.” Dhaliwal also pointed out that if many of the people who complained are locals, it could hamper the casino’s draw as a tourist destination, noting that she’s heard of people in Sacramento going to Win-River for smokefree gaming that they can’t get further south.

Hayward said he wouldn’t take back the ban, and it seems the timing may have been the biggest issue, since so few people in California are used to the idea of smoke-free gaming.

“I really, really wished it would have worked out better, because I think just overall it’s a better environment for everybody,” he said. “I think it’s just ... we’re maybe a little ahead of ourselves.

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