

Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2011 will go down as one of the most important days in Atlantic City gaming history. It was the day that Gov. Chris Christie came to the Revel Casino site to sign sweeping Atlantic City casino gaming

reforms.

Christie's support of Atlantic City is unprecedented.

You can easily make the case that it was nearly as important as the day voters in New Jersey approved casino gaming only in Atlantic City on Nov. 2, 1976 and the day that Resorts Casino Hotel opened on May 26, 1978.

Many people forget that approving casino gaming in New Jersey was no easy feat. The first public referendum failed on Nov. 5, 1974 when it was considered for implementation statewide. About 60 percent voted against the measure.

Only when it was revised to approve casino gaming exclusively in Atlantic City did the measure pass, with 1.5 million people voting for it and 1.14 million people voting against it.

For more than 30 years after, the trajectory of growth in Atlantic City gaming skyrocketed upward, with each year surpassing the one before it.

Atlantic City was unaffected during at least three recessions that took place during those first three decades. It seemed to many that this atmosphere would last forever.

A series of converging realities have taken deep root over the past three years. Relentless casino competition from neighboring jurisdictions and the Great Recession have hit Atlantic City and the entire state of New Jersey very hard.

Atlantic City's monopoly on casino gaming is long gone. Pennsylvania started out with only slot

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machines. But, as we long ago predicted, once residents and the government tasted the revenue and excitement, they would want more.

Now Pennsylvania features table games, and it's only a matter of time before they up their game in terms of additional hotel rooms, enhanced food and beverage and heightened entertainment policies.

This is truly Atlantic City's last chance to get this destination-resort thing right. The monopoly of the past successfully hid many ills. So much was right that the deficiencies simply didn't matter, from the early days at Resorts Casino Hotel when cash came in so fast they had to literally sweep it from the floor with brooms, to the new casinos opening every few years for several decades.

Now, Revel struggles to obtain the final piece of financing to finish interior construction and hopefully open sometime in 2012.

This will be the first new casino to open in Atlantic City since Borgata Casino Resort and Spa opened on July 2, 2003.

There has been much criticism heaped upon Atlantic City Mayor Lorenzo Langford for not attending the casino legislation bills signing. Despite the serious concerns he has about what this legislation will mean to the daily lives of Atlantic City residents, Atlantic City would have been best served had he attended the bill signing.

Langford has handed his enemies an open political hunting season against him. He takes criticism well, because he is used to being on the receiving end of it.

There was a better way to protest available to Langford. He could have opposed certain aspects of the new laws and still attend the signing ceremony on a purely respectful, protocol rationale basis.

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However, that's just not Langford's style. He wanted a meeting with Gov. Christie before he signed the legislation and he didn't get one. So he stayed away.

This legislation will move forward with or without Langford. Nothing short of a federal decision otherwise will stop it.

It remains to be seen whether or not Langford will make good on his previous promise to file federal litigation against the state of New Jersey on constitutional grounds.

Knowing Langford for decades, I sense that not only will he file suit, it's probably already in the early stages.

Republican 2nd District Assemblymen Vince Polistina and John Amodeo, 1st District Sen. Jeff Van Drew, a Democrat, and Assembly Deputy Speaker John Burzichelli, a Democrat from the 3rd District, have provided critical and effective leadership during the legislative battle for the new gaming reform legislation.

Burzichelli said Feb. 2 on "Hurley in the Morning" that he hopes that the new state entity in charge of the casino district (the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority) and public safety component will be up and running in Atlantic City within the next 90 days.

This is ambitious, but doable. The new legislation was formed and authorized in seven months. To accomplish the next goals in 90 days would require key partners to get on board so that Atlantic City can move forward at this critical juncture. Time is running out.

*Harry Hurley is vice president of programming and operations for Life Radio WIBG 1020 AM and Wibbage Radio 94.3 FM. He hosts the daily talk radio program "Hurley in the Morning" 7-11 a.m. weekdays on WIBG 1020 AM. He hosts various programs for local television and is the*

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*editor and publisher of his news and information website, [www.HarryHurley.com](http://www.HarryHurley.com). To comment email [This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it](#) .*

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