

Casino-restart conditions put forth by state

Written by Administrator
Friday, 24 April 2020 05:24 -

Arkansas's three casinos can reopen only when state officials are confident the spread of coronavirus is on the decline and the casino industry makes changes to protect the health of customers and staff, Gov. Asa Hutchinson said.

"I am confident we will get there," the Republican governor said in a written statement late Wednesday afternoon.

But at this time, the date for a decision on reopening the casinos will "depend upon the health data, the progress we make" and adjustments made by casinos, Hutchinson said.

Department of Health Secretary Nate Smith said Wednesday in an interview, "I do have concerns about casinos just because they are particularly high-risk.

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"They are indoors. A lot of people in a small amount of space. Often times, people with significant risk factors. Oftentimes, there is smoking going on as well and you've got a lot of people touching stuff, so if you wanted to design a setting to optimize the spread of covid-19, it would look a lot like a casino," he said.

But the casinos will "have the opportunity to come up with safer ways to do that as well and we will consider that as well," Smith said.

"But just on the face of it, it was a major concern for me and in fact at one point, one of our [early] deaths was someone who had gone to Oklahoma to go to a casino, and that was the only identifiable risk factor," Smith said.

He said this is why there is not a date set for state officials to announce a decision about

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whether to reopen the casinos.

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"There are some activities that are just intrinsically higher-risk," Smith said. "For example, we don't have a date on when we'll allow visitation to nursing homes. Those are very high-risk settings. Visitors to correctional facilities, as we've learned, those are very high-risk settings, so we are really going to have to see what happens, not just in Arkansas, but in the rest of the country as well. I think we are doing well here in terms of deaths per capita, our hospitalizations per capita, our cases per capita, but we are not an island and we can get down to zero and have an reintroduction at any point."

More than a month ago, the governor and Smith exchanged messages on what to do about casinos. The state's first confirmed covid-19 case was on March 11.

In a March 16 text message to Smith, Hutchinson wrote, "Only 2 confirmed cases in Memphis.

"How about a draft directive eliminating table games and requiring social distancing and temperature monitoring. Then we can go further if needed?"

Smith replied that "from a public health perspective, I am not comfortable with that and would like the opportunity to talk after I have called the Tennessee health commissioner."

Smith later added, "Louisiana has closed their casinos, and Mississippi is planning to this evening or tomorrow. I am concerned about their people coming here, if we stay open."

The text exchange was obtained in records from the Department of Health obtained by the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* under the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act.

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On March 17, Hutchinson said he ordered the state's three casinos -- Oaklawn in Hot Springs, Southland in West Memphis, and Saracen Casino Annex in Pine Bluff -- to close for the remainder of March as one of the efforts to limit the spread of covid-19. In late March, the state Department of Health extended that directive until the end of April. Oaklawn had announced its voluntary decision to close its casino effective March 16.

These closures affected hundreds of employees who work for the casinos and temporarily shut off a flow of tax revenue to the state and to the cities and counties that benefit from gambling revenue.

Asked about his text exchange with Smith, Hutchinson said the "exchange took place as I learned the health risk in continuing business as usual at the casinos during the Covid-19 outbreak."

"I also knew that there were around 1,000 jobs at stake and if we closed the casinos then it would put people out of work," he said Wednesday in a written statement.

"For that reason, I inquired about options for operating the casinos with new guidelines. We decided that public health concerns were paramount and that they needed to close for a time."

Asked Wednesday about his March 16 text message exchange with Hutchinson, Smith said that "the context was trying to decide what to do with our casinos.

"This was early on when we had very few cases and whether to close them down or just to limit them, and in general we want to take the least restrictive actions," he said.

"There was concern that, if we shut down, people would just go across the state lines to another casino, [and] we've accomplished nothing," he said. "So that was one where it was important for us to understand what was happening with our neighboring states and I got on the phone and talked with my fellow state health officials, and we found out that Louisiana had taken action, Mississippi was planning on taking action and so it made sense for us to do something similar. Now at the same time, Oklahoma did not largely because those [casinos] are in tribal nations."

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A spokesman for Southland's parent company said Thursday that "in the weeks prior to suspending operations, we worked to protect public health by following CDC guidelines on sanitizing protocols and cleaning throughout our venue."

"It is uncertain when Southland will reopen, and we will continue to consult with local and state officials on that," said Glen White, director of corporate communications for Buffalo, N.Y.-based Delaware North.

"Our planning for reopening is focused on ways that we will be able to keep our guests and employees safe from COVID-19 and provide them peace of mind while they are in our facility," he said.

"Oaklawn has no comment at this time," said Jennifer Hoyt, spokesman for Oaklawn.

John L. Berrey, chairman of the Quapaw Nation and the Saracen Development Authority, said in a written statement, "Saracen did not promote a policy shift impacting table games.

"While the main Saracen property will include a full slate of table game options, the Annex is comprised exclusively of slot machine gaming," he said in a written statement. The annex is a smaller gambling facility while the full-sized casino is under construction.

The Quapaw Nation's Downstream Casino Resort is preparing a reopening plan to be implemented at the appropriate time, he said, and its scope is broad, encompassing elements ranging from valet parking to self-service food and beverages.

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