

Cherokee passes casino smoking ban

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 15 December 2021 08:57 -

Casinos in Cherokee and Murphy will be permanently smoke-free following a majority vote from Tribal Council Dec. 9, codifying a policy that's been in place since the Coronavirus Pandemic spurred a temporary ban on lighting up indoors.

"This is our public health laws, which is in ordinance, which is within your realm, so this is your decision," said tribal member Lavita Hill, who has energetically advocated for the ordinance change. "What we're asking you to do, what casino employees are asking you to do, is to make a law ensuring that their workplace remains healthy and remains smoke-free."

Until a temporary pandemic [closure](#) in March 2020, indoor smoking had been allowed at both Harrah's Cherokee Casino Resort in Cherokee and Harrah's Cherokee Valley River Casino in Murphy since their original openings. When the casinos [reopened](#) in May 2020, indoor smoking was banned as part of Harrah's COVID safety protocols. Currently, patrons may smoke only in designated outdoor smoking areas.

Big Cove Representative Teresa McCoy, a former smoker, expressed strong support for the ordinance when it was discussed in Council chambers.

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“It’s a national thing that people are paying attention to — you can’t smoke in restaurants anymore, airplanes, none of that. Smoking is an addition,” she said. “It’s an option and it’s a killer.”

Principal Chief Richard Sneed said he agreed with McCoy but offered an amendment that would allow Harrah’s to create dedicated indoor gaming areas for smokers. As originally written, the ordinance would have prevented smoking near any casino operations.

“I do get concerned about competition, I do get concerned about if we put something in such a way that it would restrict us to make changes if we had to, based on [competition](#) that we know is coming close to us,” said Harrah’s General Manager Brooks Robinson. “Also, I would hope that we might be able to put something in place that might allow some of the actual gaming devices in an environment that would allow smoking.”

Tribal Council approved Sneed’s amendment, which addressed Robinson’s main concern. However, some members questioned how the legislation would impact the satisfaction of customers who want to smoke, drink and gamble at the same time.

“I think the customer should be the first consideration,” said Painttown Representative Tommye Saunooke. “That’s my opinion.”

“It definitely is a consideration, and it’s also a consideration for our staff, because we do want to put them in the best situation possible,” Brooks replied.

However, he said, there is a segment of customers who are upset about the smoking ban and the inconvenience it causes.

Snowbird/Cherokee County Representative Adam Wachacha asked if Harrah’s had done any surveys to determine what a permanent smoking ban might do to customer satisfaction. Robinson said the casino had not done a specific survey on the issue but that reviews of social media feedback showed that the no-smoking rule “is a point we continue to get called out on.”

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“Transitioning to nonsmoking casinos has not been without its challenges,” said Harrah’s Regional Vice President for Marketing Brian Saunooke in a follow-up email. “We receive feedback from guests who would prefer to be able to smoke while playing their favorite games, but we also hear from those who strongly prefer the smoke-free environment. The long-term impact remains to be seen.”

Hill argued that the no-smoking rule is actually a plus for customer satisfaction, because most players are non-smokers who appreciate breathing cleaner air — only a “small segment” is inconvenienced, she said.

A review of posts on the 6,900-member [Facebook group](#) Friends Who Like Harrah’s Cherokee Casino Resort backs up that assertion. An Oct. 16 post reading “Fingers crossed Harrah’s will remain smoke free” received 203 reactions, of which 199 were either “like” or “love.” Likewise, the flurry of posts after Tribal Council’s Dec. 9 vote had an overall positive tone. The one with the most engagement received 381 reactions, of which 364 were “like” or “love.”

“If we were talking about bottom line, let’s just look at our [December per capita](#), which was the highest-grossing ever,” Hill said. “We can’t argue that nonsmoking has impacted us in a negative way when revenue is actually up.”

It’s too early to comment as to whether the casino will create designated gaming areas for smokers, or on what timeline that would happen, said Brian Saunooke. But because both casinos are operating as nonsmoking facilities, no immediate action will be necessary to comply with the ordinance change should it become law. The ordinance still requires Sneed’s signature to become effective, but in light of his verbal support Dec. 9 that signature is likely forthcoming.

Tribal Council passed the measure with eight members in support and four opposed. Painttown Representatives Tommye Saunooke and Dike Sneed voted against it, along with Yellowhill Representatives David Wolfe and T.W. Saunooke.

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