

## More bipartisan support for Atlantic City casino smoking ban

Written by Administrator

Monday, 31 January 2022 13:04 -

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ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) — A bill that would ban smoking in Atlantic City's casinos is picking up more bipartisan support, but it remains unclear whether the state's Democratic political leadership will allow it to move forward.

The bill, like one that died without a vote in last year's legislative session, would amend New Jersey's Smoke-Free Air Act to include casinos. The gambling halls are specifically exempted from the law.

Smoking is allowed on no more than 20% of a casino's floor in Atlantic City.

On Monday, Republican state Sen. Michael Testa said he has added his backing to the bill as a co-sponsor. He joins fellow Republican Vince Polistina, and Democrats Shirley Turner; Joseph Vitale; Patrick Diegnan; Teresa Ruiz and Vin Gopal.

"Casino workers should have the same right to work in a safe and healthy environment as any other worker in our state," Testa said. "We can both protect the health of casino workers and their guests while safeguarding our state's thriving gaming industry."

Its chances, however, remain unclear. The bill has been referred to a Senate committee that is meeting on Thursday; the casino smoking bill is not on the committee's agenda.

A spokesperson for Assembly speaker Craig Coughlin said that if legislation is reintroduced there, "the speaker is prepared to thoroughly and thoughtfully review the bill."

A message seeking comment from Senate president Nicholas Scutari was not immediately returned.

Over the past year, a group of casino workers and health advocates has been making a push to

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eliminate the casino loophole in the state's smoking ban law.

"We have support from Republicans and Democrats, as well as legislators across New Jersey, because they recognize that it's wrong to treat us differently than every other worker in our state," said Nicola Vitola, a Borgata dealer and a leader of the anti-smoking group. "Senator Testa understands the urgency of our fight, and we are grateful that he is joining us to get this bill across the finish line."

Murphy has said he will sign a casino smoking ban into law if the Legislature passes such a bill.

The Casino Association of New Jersey, representing the Atlantic City casinos, reiterated its stance Monday that banning smoking would cost jobs, money and tax revenue.

"Banning smoking completely and permanently would have long-term financial implications for the industry and the region, placing Atlantic City casinos at a competitive disadvantage with Pennsylvania casinos where smoking is permitted," said Joe Lupo, president of the association and of the Hard Rock casino. "A decline in our customer base would also cause economic hardship to a large portion of the 20,000 employees who rely on the tips and customer volume that our industry provides."

He noted that the land-based casino industry in Atlantic City saw its revenue dip to 5% below the levels of 2019 before the coronavirus pandemic hit, indicating it has not yet overcome the challenges posed by the virus.

"Any policy changes that will result in decreased visitation, job loss and additional economic harm to our region should be the last thing we consider as the industry works diligently to rebuild and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic," he said.

When the coronavirus pandemic hit in 2020, it shut down casinos for 3 1/2 months. Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy banned smoking as a virus transmission-prevention measure when the casinos reopened in July 2020.

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That ban expired in April 2021, and smoking foes have been trying to get it reinstituted and made permanent ever since.

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