

Indoor smoking returns in Atlantic City casinos on the Fourth of July.



By Tracey Tully

July 1, 2021

New Jersey's yearlong ban on smoking inside casinos in Atlantic City will end on Sunday as the state continues to relax its coronavirus-related mandates.

But even as Gov. Philip D. Murphy acknowledged an end to the safety rule he implemented when casinos reopened a year ago, he strongly suggested that he supported efforts to make Atlantic City's nine remaining casinos smoke free permanently.

Of the states with legalized gambling, nine, including New York and Massachusetts, bar smoking inside casinos, and many others permit it only within designated areas, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

When asked Wednesday about the Fourth of July end to smoke-free casino floors, Mr. Murphy, a Democrat running for re-election, volunteered that he was "open-minded" to a pending legislative effort to end smoking inside gaming facilities.

"Would I be constructive on legislation?" Mr. Murphy said during a news briefing, adding, "I would be very constructive on that."

Casinos, one of the state's most powerful economic drivers, were among the first businesses to close in March 2020, as New Jersey became an early center of the virus, thrusting thousands of employees out of work over night.

An estimated 15.8 percent of workers in and around the seaside gaming hub lost jobs during the pandemic — the third-largest metropolitan decline nationwide, according to a recent study by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

When casinos reopened last July, smoking, which health officials warned could quickly spread the virus through exhaled vapor, was outlawed.

Some groups, including Smoke Free Atlantic City, a nonprofit funded by the state, have pressed to make the ban permanent even as officials with a casino trade association warned that would drive gamblers away and hurt the region's recovery.

Bills that would bar smoking have not advanced in the State Legislature.

Tracey Tully covers New Jersey. She joined The Times in 2018 as a senior editor. She previously covered city and state government at The Daily News, the Albany Times Union and the Jersey Journal. @traceytully