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Video gambling goes live across Illinois

It's rolled out 3 years after law was passed

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Lights flashed and casino sounds pulsed Tuesday afternoon inside Crabby's Pub in Stickney, where Walter Nitka was among the first to hit it big after the bar — like dozens of other establishments in Illinois — began to operate legal [video](#) gambling machines.

"I'm here to make money," said Nitka, 76, of Forest View.

He put \$40 in one of four machines at Crabby's when it was turned on Tuesday. An hour later, he was up by more than \$200. "So far, I'm doing great," said Nitka, who is retired.

Tuesday's official launch of video gambling at such places as bars, [truck](#) stops and fraternal organizations in the state came almost 31/2 years after approval by the General Assembly.

Crabby's is one of 65 locations — with a total 278 gaming terminals — that were among the first to be allowed to operate the machines, according to the Illinois Gaming Board. More machines are expected to be running soon at other locations.

Video gambling was proposed as a way to fund capital improvement projects in Illinois. The state will get 25 percent of net profits, while local communities will receive 5 percent. Machine operators and business owners will divide the rest.

The state began testing [video poker](#) machines in a few locations last month to allow the Gaming Board to ferret out any bugs in the central computer system that the state will use to track revenue at each machine and ensure it gets its part of the proceeds.

The implementation was delayed by the lengthy reviews of the license applications filed by the manufacturers, distributors and businesses or clubs that would use the games. There also was a lack of staff at the Gaming Board to investigate and process all the applications. Hiccups in the state's efforts to source a central [computer system](#) capable of monitoring up to 60,000 video poker machines throughout the state also hampered the start.

"This is an entirely new industry," Illinois Gaming Board President Aaron Jaffe said. "When you think of giving out tens of thousands of licenses ... and that we have to do investigations that would boggle your mind, that takes a great [deal](#) of time."

According to a Gaming Board release, the agency is processing gaming license applications from more than 2,000 locations.

When video poker was authorized in 2009, the state estimated that as many as 45,000 machines would be installed in Illinois, bringing in \$288 million to \$534 million annually for capital improvement projects.

But dozens of communities quickly banned video poker in their towns, and the city of Chicago would not remove its long-standing ban. That, coupled with the discovery that a host of communities throughout the state had old local laws that would prohibit video poker in their jurisdictions, drove previous revenue forecasts sharply downward.

Bar owners said they need the additional revenue as much as the state does.

Alfonso "Izzy" Izquierdo, owner of Izzy's bar in Joliet, was relieved to learn the waiting was over Tuesday.

"This has been a long, long time coming," said Izquierdo, whose bar has five video gambling machines.

Gary Taylor, whose Assembly American Bar & Cafe in Hoffman Estates went online as a test site Sept. 20, said he expected a bigger impact with the machines.

"We're not seeing a huge amount of people coming out, but the response has been for the entertainment value, the chance to win money," Taylor said. "There's excitement there for sure."

Although sales are up slightly, Taylor attributes that to football season, not the machines.

At Hub Lounge in Harvard, one could hear the bells and jingles going off on the five machines that went live about 3:30 p.m.

"Everyone is excited," bar owner Cindy Waldo said, within about the first hour of going live. "We have had like four or five people playing them already. ..."

"It will be interesting to see how it goes."

But not everyone is celebrating.

"It's a sucker's bet," said Tom Grey of the national group Stop Predatory Gambling.

A former Chicago pastor who now lives in Washington, D.C., Grey casts the video machines as "the worst kind of gambling because it goes directly into neighborhoods and takes money from families in those communities."

But sitting in front of the glowing touch screen of a video poker machine playing the song "Puttin' on the Ritz" at Crabby's, Cicero resident Carl Swiecionis said he thinks the state made a good bet.

"I've been waiting months for this day," he said. "I went to (the casino) and lost \$300 yesterday. I'm done with them. I am just going to come here every day. It's great to be with friends and play on the machines."

Meyer is a Tribune reporter. Ruzich is a freelance reporter. Tribune reporters Matthew Walberg and Sally Ho and freelance reporter Amanda Marrazzo contributed.