

Young gamblers help Pa. casinos

Demographic for table games always has and continues to be younger males.

DONALD GILLILAND The (Harrisburg) Patriot-News

HARRISBURG — One year after table games opened in Pennsylvania casinos, one rule of thumb holds generally true: If you want to know where the tables are located, look for someone under 30 and follow him.

Casino regulators resist this, saying it's too simple. Table games such as poker and blackjack are enjoyed by everyone, they say. But while one does occasionally see white-haired ladies with big smiles and sharp eyes at the tables, they are not the norm.

The demographic for table games “always has and continues to skew a little male and younger,” says Wendy Hamilton, general manager of SugarHouse casino in Philadelphia.

What that means for casinos is they have a lot more new customers than they did a year ago — and a lot more money.

With the revenue from June yet to be tallied, table games have already raked in almost half a billion dollars across the state — including over \$64 million to the state coffers — without significantly depressing the revenue from slot machines.

Table games have gone “very well,” said Kevin O’Toole, executive director of the Gaming Control Board. “It’s reached its expectations in terms of job growth and in terms of gross revenue and tax revenue.”

“It has allowed the Pennsylvania casinos to continue their growth by offering a full service gaming experience,” added board spokesman Doug Harbach.

Slot machines are still where the big money is. With over 26,000 machines in 10 casinos around the state, slots gambling is on schedule to make well over \$2.3 billion this year, with over \$790 million coming to the state for tax relief.

The slots, nevertheless, remain largely the province of the over-40, often well over. And the game is not without critics.

Paul Boni, a Philadelphia attorney and board member of the national group Stop Predatory Gambling, recently called on the Gaming Control Board to “demand copies of the casinos’ databases and make them public.” Boni contends the casinos know who is most likely addicted and is preying on them. The state’s self-reporting problem gaming registry is not enough, he says.

Boni quoted the general manager of Harrah's Chester Downs as saying there's a segment of his casino's patrons who visit 5.6 times a week on average. Last year, an official at Parx casino said the majority of its patrons visit three to four times a week.

The story of Pennsylvania gambling is best illustrated in the southeast, where nearly half of all the state's casino revenue and 56 percent of table games revenue is generated by just four casinos.

Pennsylvania's three highest-grossing casinos — Parx in Bensalem, Sands in Bethlehem and Harrah's Chester Downs — are near New Jersey. Nearly half the patrons at one of them are reportedly now from outside the state.

But it's the fifth-place berth that really tells the story. SugarHouse — on the waterfront in Philadelphia — has the fewest tables in the state, but ranks fifth in table revenue. SugarHouse only opened last September, but it's a table games powerhouse, bringing in over \$46 million in nine months.