



Casinos Push Back on Massachusetts Gambling Limits

Casinos push back on Massachusetts plan to require parlors to limit gamblers' time, wagers

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In a rarely used strategy to address gambling addiction, Massachusetts regulators may require casinos to reward their customers for voluntarily setting limits on how much time and money they spend at slot machines.

But the state's recently licensed casino companies [Wynn Resorts](#), MGM Resorts International and Penn National Gaming ? have voiced strong concerns over the proposal, suggesting such programs have not proved effective elsewhere.

The programs, sometimes called play management, limit-setting or pre-commitment programs, are in place in [New Zealand](#), [Singapore](#), Norway, Sweden and Canada. Australia has piloted a limiting system in four of its states. Massachusetts would be the first in the U.S. to attempt such a program, according to casino and state officials.

Stephen Crosby, chairman of the Massachusetts Gaming Commission, said giving gamblers the option to monitor and limit their spending is no different than calorie counting or setting limits on how much alcohol to keep in a home.

"Setting limits on activities which might get us in trouble is a reasonable and commonplace activity," he said in a letter sent this month to the state's three casino operators, stressing he hasn't yet made up his mind on the issue.

But casino executives, addressing the commission Thursday, said research has shown that such programs do not work ? a point that regulators disputed.

The American Gaming Association, the industry's trade group, noted in a letter that the Canadian province of Nova Scotia discontinued its limit-setting program in September after nearly nine years, citing low usage and declines in gambling revenues.

"It has failed," said Alan Feldman, an executive vice president for MGM, which is building an \$800 million resort in Springfield.

Stop Predatory Gambling, a D.C.-based nonprofit, supports the play management idea, saying it would help mitigate the lure of slot machines, which the group says can be addictive.

"Electronic gambling machines are built mathematically so users are guaranteed to lose their money the longer they play," the organization said. "It is an absolute mathematical certainty that citizens will lose all of their money the more they continue to use the machines."

Jay Snowden, chief operating officer for Penn National Gaming, which is building a \$225 million slots parlor at the harness racing track in Plainville, said his company is concerned there isn't enough time to roll out the system before its planned June opening.

He suggested the state pilot the program before making any long-term commitment. MGM's and Wynn's casinos are expected to open in 2017 or later.

The commission took no action on the proposal Thursday.

But casino executives said they oppose enrolling slot machine players automatically and giving them an option to decline participation, as a commission consultant has recommended.

They warned such a "mandatory" arrangement might turn off customers, making their facilities less competitive and jeopardizing the \$300 million to \$500 million in annual tax revenues Massachusetts is anticipating from the new industry.

"If we make the experience difficult, cumbersome or embarrassing for our slot customers, I do worry that they will make another choice and go somewhere else," said Robert DeSalvio, who is overseeing Wynn's \$1.6 billion casino project in Everett.

The executives also objected to a recommendation that the casinos provide incentives to customers who sign up for the voluntary program and stick to their predetermined limits.

"If someone has a problem, the absolute worst thing we can do as an industry is give them an incentive that might actually (get) them to come back for a future visit," DeSalvio said.

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