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Bethlehem Sands casino wants stiffer penalties for underage gamblers

Revoke violators' driving privileges, casino's president says at Bethlehem hearing.

October 15, 2013 | By Matt Assad, Of The Morning Call

Sands President Robert DeSalvio said Tuesday he would like to see heavier penalties for underage gamblers at his Bethlehem casino.

DeSalvio, during a license renewal hearing at Bethlehem City Hall, said he would like state legislators to pass a law that would hit underage gamblers with a one-year loss of their driving license for trying to enter any Pennsylvania casino to gamble.

Sands last month was fined \$56,000 by the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board for four incidents this year in which people were able to get into the casino and gamble before they were 21 years old.

That, DeSalvio said, is offset by the more than 7,000 underage people who have been turned away from the casino this year.

"It's a technology arms race and the fakes are getting better," DeSalvio said. "I think for a first offense, a person should lose their license for a year. I think that would be an excellent deterrent."

Now, violators face criminal charges of underage gambling and providing false identification to law enforcement. Both misdemeanors carry little more than a fine.

"I know we've had to pay our penalties in the form of fines," DeSalvio said. "But I'm frustrated that our security staff has to constantly keep up with fraudulent IDs, fake IDs and IDs from brothers, nephews and cousins."

Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem previously had been fined three times for underage gambling or drinking violations. In 2010, it paid a \$48,000 fine for allowing six incidents; it paid another \$48,000 fine in 2012 for four incidents; and earlier this year it paid a \$68,000 fine because six underage patrons who did not gamble were served alcohol, according to gaming board spokesman Doug Harbach.

DeSalvio's comments came during the first of what figures to be two hearings to determine whether the Bethlehem casino's gaming license should be renewed. The second, yet-to-be-scheduled meeting will be in Harrisburg.

During the more than two-hour hearing at Bethlehem City Hall, DeSalvio detailed the casino's \$830 million investment to build a complex that includes more than 3,000 slot machines, 183 table games, a hotel, an outlet mall and an events center. The complex employs nearly 2,800 workers, 90 percent of whom are full time, DeSalvio said.

The license, which was first renewed in 2010, would run for another three years. All four community members who testified during the hearing spoke in favor of renewal, and though gaming board members will not vote until the second hearing, they left little question about what their vote will be.

"It's no secret that Sands is one of the flagship casinos in Pennsylvania," gaming board member Gregory Fajt said. "You guys have a wonderful story to tell."

It doesn't hurt that Sands is one of the state's most successful gambling halls. It's Pennsylvania's second-most lucrative casino, pulling in \$290 million in slot-machine revenue and \$165 million in table games revenue during the 2012-13 fiscal years. For those years, Sands paid about \$118 million in state taxes.

It's one of 12 casinos statewide. The gaming board has never failed to renew the license of any casino.

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