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## Casino exec: "Downsizing is not fun at all"

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By Brad Kessie - [bio](#) | [email](#)

BILOXI, MS (WLOX) - Blunt talk about Biloxi and its struggling casinos headlined the opening session of the Southern Gaming Summit.

The head of the Isle of Capri called Biloxi "a mini Atlantic City." And she said that was not a flattering comparison.

Minutes earlier, Penn National Gaming's president said Atlantic City was in "a death spiral" right now, because it was giving away so many freebies.

They both said that seems to be the direction coast casinos are heading. And that worries them. So do the casino revenue numbers and customer counts numbers in 2008 and 2009 that are both below expectations, forcing cutbacks at properties.

"Downsizing is not fun at all," a casino bigwig said.

The "I Dream of Jeannie" slot machine on display at the Southern Gaming Summit expo hall is still alluring to gamblers. But getting people to Mississippi's shoreline on a regular basis to play games like that has become the gaming industry's biggest challenge.

Virginia McDowell is the Isle of Capri's President.

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"In Biloxi, it's a tough market right now," she admitted.

McDowell's company has three Mississippi casinos, including the Isle on Biloxi's Point Cadet.

"We're all in the same position," she said, referring to the Isle and its 10 competitors in south Mississippi. "Which means we're all competing against each other for the same customers. And it becomes very difficult."

The property next to the Isle is Grand Biloxi. Its president is John Payne.

"Our goal, I think, as an industry is to continue to add value, giving customers, and new customers different reasons to come to our facilities," he said.

Payne, McDowell, and Penn National Gaming's Tim Wilmott were the featured speakers during a session on the state of the gaming industry, specifically in south Mississippi. The current outlook, they all said, was rather gloomy.

"It's a market that still has a ways to go to rebound," Wilmott said.

He runs Hollywood Casino in Bay St. Louis, and Boomtown Casino in Biloxi.

"Until we can see a market that's growing where it would represent an opportunity capital, significant growth capital, we're very much in a maintenance mode here in southern Mississippi right now."

So how do you create growth? The panelists all said words like more value, and compelling experiences must be emphasized if gamblers are going to be lured to south Mississippi's 11 casino resorts.

"Southern Mississippi will be a long term viable market," said Wilmott. "It's just one right now, along with many others in this country that are suffering due to these economic conditions."

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