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## Gaming climate shifted

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS • MAY 7, 2009

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BILOXI — Even after the recession and credit lockdown that has plummeted the casino industry ends, the business faces a new approach that will feature more competition for wagering dollars and the likelihood that enthusiastic lenders who fronted huge projects are a thing of the past, industry leaders said Wednesday.

ADVERTISEMENT During the annual Southern Gaming Summit on the casino strip of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, officials also said that money-pinched state governments might be tempted to raise taxes - limiting new investments by casinos.

"We've been growing our markets based on building and expansion and hiring new employees," said John Payne, central division president for Las Vegas-based Harrah's Entertainment Inc. "We're going to have to learn how to attract new customers without building."

New casino projects have come to a virtual halt since the economic meltdown last year, with companies saying that credit would come at prohibitive double digit interest rates - if it could be obtained at all. At the same time, gambling revenue is down in virtually all U.S. markets from a year ago.

Industry officials said the credit situation has created a double-fold problem: companies cannot even obtain financing to add non-gambling amenities while those features are needed to attract more customers.

Several officials also said additional expansion in Florida could chop away drive-in business to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. At the same time, Arkansas casino proposals pose a threat to Mississippi's Tunica County casinos.