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# Gambling officials: betting on casino industry takes a ROLL OF THE DICE

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BILOXI — Three casino operators said their companies won't be building or expanding on the Coast until the economy turns around.

In a state-of-the-industry report during Wednesday's Southern Gaming Summit, they also said a smoking ban would burn the Coast casinos industry, too many comps could hurt business and layoffs in their industry have been the toughest part of the economic downturn.

The summit continues today at the Coast Convention Center, with Gov. Haley Barbour scheduled to speak at 11:30 a.m.



PHOTOS BY AMANDA McCOY/SUN HERALD A crowd gathers to try out Interblock USA's new game, Sic-Bo, during the Southern Gaming Summit's Expo on Wednesday. The game is similar to roulette but played with dice.

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The economy is the focus of this year's summit, which has fewer exhibits at the expo but more people through the doors. "We still have over 250 booths," said Beverly Martin, executive director of the Mississippi Casino Operators Association, a sponsor of the event, "and our attendance is up."

John Payne, president of Harrah's Entertainment Central Division, said construction has stopped on Margaritaville Casino, yet singer/songwriter Jimmy Buffett remains tied to the resort.

"We are still passionate about the project," Payne said. The company eventually hopes to get the resort built in Biloxi, he said. "We'll know more in six to nine months."

Plans to expand the neighboring Isle Casino were put on hold when construction stopped at Margaritaville. As a regional casino operator, "we have to build the right project to get the right return," said Virginia McDowell, president of Isle of Capri Casinos.

Tim Wilmott, president of Penn National Gaming, said there won't be any capital projects at the company's Boomtown Biloxi or Hollywood Casino Bay St. Louis until the economy, the credit markets and the Coast's visibility as a casino destination improve. The company has casinos in 16 regional markets and Wilmott said its strategic plan is to expand to Las Vegas. When the right Vegas property is offered at the right price, "we're going to jump on it," he said.

Meanwhile, "customers are still coming. The big difference is the spend per visit is down," he said.

Casinos need to create more value for casino customers, said Payne, which doesn't necessarily mean giving comps and discounts.

With fewer residents since Hurricane Katrina, McDowell said the Coast is very dependent on drive-in business. When casinos start offering free food and rooms, "it gets highly expensive to drive that business in," she said.

Instead, the casinos need to create experiences because they are competing not just with other casinos but with concerts, restaurants and ballparks.

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