

Massachusetts casino closures extended until May 18

By Colin A. Young

State House News Service

Gaming regulators voted Friday to prolong their mandated shutdown of the state's slots parlor and casinos until at least May 18 in line with Gov. Charlie Baker's latest order, and announced plans for an internal group to focus in-depth on issues around re-opening casinos.

Without debate or discussion, the Gaming Commission made quick work of its short agenda for Friday morning's conference call meeting, voting 5-0 to parallel the governor's extension of his order that non-essential businesses be shut down and mass gatherings be banned. Commissioners who chimed in agreed that keeping their forced shutdown in place for at least the duration of the governor's order was appropriate.

The commission decided on March 14 – when the limit on public gatherings was 250 people and more than a week before the governor ordered certain businesses shuttered – to close the three betting halls the next day. With the latest extension, the state's casinos will be closed for at least two months.

Typically, the state can rely on about \$20 million in monthly tax revenue from gambling. Before they closed on March 15, the state's casinos and slots parlor collected roughly \$35 million in gross gaming revenue, generating just under \$10 million in tax revenue for the state. Since all three facilities will be closed for all of April, the state will see no tax revenue from gaming, further compounding an already nightmarish revenue picture for state budget managers.

The state's three simulcast centers – at Plainridge Park, Suffolk Downs and Raynham Park – also remain closed to the

public, the commission's director of racing, Dr. Alexandra Lightbown, said Friday. Plainridge and Suffolk Downs, which offer remote betting via advanced deposit wagering, are allowed to continue that, the commission has agreed.

Chairwoman Cathy Judd-Stein said Friday that she is working with Interim Executive Director Karen Wells to assemble an internal "restart working group" that will help to develop "a responsible restart plan" for the casinos and the Gaming Commission's offices. She said commissioners should expect more detail on that group at next Thursday's meeting.

"There's really two buckets; there's the technical opening and then, because of the situation we find ourselves in now, we have health and safety issues we need to address," Wells said. "The technical opening protocols and procedures will consist of an assessment of the regulatory process required to bring casinos back online, including an extensive operations checklist that ensures necessary compliance and integrity standards."

The second chunk of issues the plan will have to address relate specifically to the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigation measures that are unique to a public health crisis.

"Topics there are going to include, but not be limited to, enhanced sanitation procedures, employee training, physical distancing, occupancy limitation and any other guidance provided by the public health authorities," Wells said. "The plan will also need to account for what procedures will be necessary in the event of a restart setback."

The commission has already begun looking into what it might be able to learn from Macau, China. After shutting down for two weeks amid the COVID-19 pandemic there, Macau casinos began to reopen in late February under tight restrictions. Only half of each casino's table are allowed to be open, all gamblers must wear masks and have their body temperature taken when entering

a casino, and casino employees must also attest that they are healthy before reporting to work.