

Massachusetts casinos closing for two weeks as coronavirus prevention measure

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State House News Service

Massachusetts gaming regulators and its licensees agreed to a two-week shutdown of the state's slots parlor and two resorts casinos Saturday and are working to finalize the plan as state government takes serious steps to try to staunch the spread of the coronavirus that's infected 123 people in the state.

Gaming operations are expected to cease by late Saturday night and other operations at the casinos – hotels, restaurants, clubs and retail shops – would have to shut down by Sunday under the plan the commission authorized its staff to put into writing for final approval. Another meeting is expected to finalize the plan.

The casino operators said they would need some time to ensure the closures are orderly and safe, and to rebook overnight guests at other hotels.

The Mass. Gaming Commission held an emergency meeting via conference call at 10 a.m. Saturday morning to discuss the "operational status of gaming licensees in light of the coronavirus." Representatives from Plainridge Park Casino in Plainville, MGM Springfield and Encore Boston Harbor in Everett participated in the call and each business said it was fully on board with the commission's action.

Commission staffers said discussions around the plan were collaborative with the casino companies and evolved over the last few weeks. Interim Executive Director Karen Wells said the licensees agreed to "an orderly closure from the

commission.”

Brian Gullbrants, president of Encore Boston Harbor, said he thinks it is “prudent at this time to pause our operations.” A representative of MGM Springfield said the company is “fully supportive of whatever your decision may be.”

The change will have economic impacts on the state’s coffers, and the pocketbooks of the thousands of people who have found jobs in the relatively young Massachusetts gaming world. All three companies pledged during Saturday’s meeting to pay its full-time employees during the two-week shutdown.

The commission is due to publish February revenue figures on Monday, but the state can typically rely on about \$21 million in monthly revenue from its three gambling halls.

Commissioner Eileen O’Brien called the decision “the only prudent thing to do” given the public health emergency.

“I agree that we need to be better safe than sorry,” commissioner Enrique Zuniga said.

The commission said its operations staff will coordinate with the casinos to figure out the fine details of the “orderly closure” and expects to hold another meeting this weekend to discuss those details.

All three facilities said they expect to maintain a small team of staff – management and security, mostly – during the closures.

Around the country, other states have shut down or limited casino operations as American society adjusts to social distancing in a public health emergency.

Illinois on Friday suspended riverboat casino operations and Ohio ordered its gaming facilities to either close or keep the number of customers and workers present below 100.

On Friday, Gov. Charlie Baker banned most gatherings of 250

people or more, the Catholic Church in Boston suspended Masses until further notice and many local school systems have canceled classes for at least a week. In Boston's case, schools will likely be closed until late April.

Sporting events, concerts, theater performances and conferences have been called off. A massive chunk of the state's workforce is adjusting to working remotely and state agencies like the Gaming Commission are operating in uncharted waters.

Saturday morning's unusual virtual emergency meeting was made possible by the fact that Baker this week suspended parts of the Open Meeting Law in an attempt to allow government to function without putting people in physical proximity of one another.

The commission posted a public notice of the meeting – including the dial-in information for any member of the public who wanted to “attend” the meeting – around 11 p.m. Friday.