

Casinos ready to open doors, tourists ready to return to Las Vegas

By Bailey Schulz and Richard N. Velotta Las Vegas Review-Journal
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The two-month casino shutdown in Nevada seems to have an end in sight.

On Friday afternoon, Gov. Steve Sisolak gave Nevada casinos a tentative date they could plan to reopen: June 4. Seventy-eight days after casinos first closed down to help stem the spread of COVID-19.

The move comes as the state has faced an increasing amount of pressure to reopen; Nevada's unemployment rate hit record highs in April, and casinos in 12 other states had opened their doors ahead of those in Sin City.

Virginia Valentine, president and CEO of the Nevada Resort Association, said Sisolak's announcement is "fantastic news" for Nevada's gaming industry.

"Our members have spent more than two months preparing for this day," she said in an emailed statement. "They've put in place enhanced health and safety plans and protocols ... Our members are excited to show off the enhancements they've made that preserve the experience while ensuring the well-being of our employees and visitors."

'We're ready to go back'

Casinos have been preparing for this day for weeks, publishing updated health and safety guidelines and setting tentative booking dates online to make sure they'd have guests ready to fill rooms.

"It's been a long two months for us. It's been a long two months for everyone in the state, but we're ready to go back to business in Nevada," said Boyd Gaming Corp. spokesman David Strow.

Strow said the company would release more details on how many of its 12 Nevada casinos would be reopening on June 4 after the Nevada Gaming Control Board meeting workshop meeting, which will provide further insights on health and safety when six experts address the three-member board in a videoconference.

Testimony from experts from both ends of the state could lead to further actions by the board that day.

Wynn Resorts Ltd. spokesman Michael Weaver said the company looks forward to working with regulators as it moves toward reopening.

"We applaud Governor Sisolak for his decision to target June 4 for opening resorts," he said via email. "Because of his careful, science-based approach to containing the virus, Nevada is now ready to open its economy and get people working again."

Caesars Entertainment Corp. spokesman Richard Broom said the company plans to reopen properties on June 4, "per the governor's order."

“We are excited to welcome back guests and team members with enhanced health and safety protocols in compliance with state directives,” he said via email.

Spokespeople for Las Vegas Sands Corp., Station Casinos and MGM Resorts International declined to comment.

Tourists ready to return

Virginia Allegra from Fresno, California, said she plans to visit Las Vegas soon after it reopens; she’s already had to rebook six reservations with MGM Resorts as tentative booking dates were pushed back.

On Friday, she booked a three-week stay in June and July, with plans to stay at a new hotel each week.

“I wish they would have opened sooner!” she said via email.

Joann Woodward, a nurse practitioner working in Downey, California, said she plans to go back in the middle or end of June, to give the casino operators time to “practice” their new health and safety guidelines.

She added that she feels “pretty safe” in casinos.

“I’m a nurse practitioner, I already wash my hands 40, 50 times a day,” she said. “I’m not going to shake hands with anybody or hug them.”

Others, like Ryan Cisneros from Texas, want to wait until Las Vegas properties end social distancing protocols at table games and pools before returning.

“Vegas is all about social interactions, especially at the blackjack table,” he said. “I typically go to Vegas two to three times a year, but until everything is

normal regarding the social distancing aspect, (I) would rather just wait or go somewhere else.”

Steve Hill, president and CEO of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, said employees and guests should feel confident returning to casinos, pointing to resorts’ public health and safety plans.

“I know that our state, county and health leaders together with our resort partners have taken every necessary step and precaution to ensure a safe and sustained opening,” Hill said in an emailed statement.

All eyes on the Gaming Control Board

On Thursday afternoon, Sisolak named June 4 as the Nevada’s gaming industry’s reopening target date, “pending the evaluation of trends in Nevada’s COVID-19 data, along with the results of the Gaming Control Board Meeting on Tuesday.”

“The attention now turns to the Nevada Gaming Control Board workshop,” said Josh Swissman, founding partner of The Strategy Organization, a marketing consultant in Las Vegas. “This workshop, coupled with continued positive trending COVID-19 data, should provide the governor with everything he needs to stand firm on his June 4 date.”

If the reopening date holds, casinos would still roughly two weeks prepare to reopen.

That should be “sufficient time” for casinos to mobilize their workforce and begin sending out promotions, according to Josh Swissman, founding partner of The Strategy Organization, a marketing consultant in Las Vegas.

“Casino companies targeting an opening date on the 4th have had ample (time) to plan for this moment,” he said via email. “I suspect many casino executives will be working overtime throughout the long weekend to make that happen, though. It is ‘game on’ for marketing executives that have been spending the last few weeks figuring out the best time to fire up their promotional engines.”

He expects to see a “steady stream” of email updates, offer postcards and social media posts from casinos over the coming days.

Brendan Bussmann, director of government affairs for Las Vegas-based Global Market Advisors LLC, said the June 4 date “finally provides us with hopefully an end to the fuzzy phasing we’ve had to get the state’s leading industry back on its feet.”

“It’ll be good to see the energy and the jobs and the life come back to the Strip, even under these unusual circumstances,” he said.

Sisolak’s announcement came hours after the tourism-dependent state reported a 28.2 percent unemployment rate, the highest of any state in any month since 1976, when consistent data first became available.

The number was shocking, even to local economists.

“I don’t think anyone was expecting that level,” said Stephen Miller, director of UNLV’s Center for Business and Economic Research.

Economist Jeremy Aguero of Applied Analysis said bringing Nevada’s largest industry back to life could help the state economy begin to recover.

“It’s an important first step in pushing our economy forward, getting our economy back to where it was previously,” Aguero said. “There’s a great deal of uncertainty, but we’re taking steps to open all facets of our economy, and that’s exactly what needs to be done.”

While the reopening could allow thousands of Nevadans to return to work, Miller said it’ll have to be “done successfully” to avoid a second wave of the virus.

“The governor is in a tough position,” he said. “(You’re facing) two issues: One is a public health issue, the other is an economic issue. If you try to solve one issue, you could make the other potentially worse.”

But Aguero said the reopening date is an “excellent sign” that there is continued progress in the fight against COVID-19.

“The governor has indicated his decisions are based on science, and he feels comfortable that the science is indicating it’s safe for us to reopen,” he said. “There’s no doubt this is an excellent sign people will go back to work. ... (But) like expectations that it’ll take the tourism industry time to ramp up, it’ll take time for employees to come back online.”

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