

Las Vegas Valley casinos allowed 80% occupancy starting May 1

By Richard N. Velotta Las Vegas Review-Journal

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The Nevada Gaming Control Board late Friday issued a new health and safety directive that will enable 80 percent occupancy in most casinos and a 3-foot social distancing requirement, effective May 1.

The state's directive for wearing facial coverings as a means to slow the coronavirus pandemic remains in place.

The board's notice offers a county-by-county directive on capacity limitations for gaming areas.

For Clark County, the occupancy limit is 80 percent, but that would increase to 100 percent as soon as county officials verify that 60 percent of the eligible population has received its first COVID-19 vaccination.

A 3-foot social distancing requirement would be rescinded when the 60 percent vaccination rate is reached.

Clark County Commission Chairwoman Marilyn Kirkpatrick said Friday that the vaccination rate of Clark County residents was at 47 percent as of Thursday and that she expects the level to reach 50 percent by the end of next week.

The board also warned that requirements for facial coverings will remain and that current health and safety directives are in place through April 30 at 11:59 p.m.

The Control Board directive was issued on the same day Nevada matched the highest single-day increase in coronavirus deaths in more than two months.

The notice, signed by Control Board Chairman Brin Gibson, also includes new gaming floor restrictions for every Nevada county.

The Control Board's jurisdiction applies only to gaming areas and not to other casino amenities such as hotel rooms and swimming pools.

The board said Washoe County's local plan was not adequate so casinos in Reno and Sparks will be required to continue with 50 percent occupancy and 6-foot social distancing.

It also determined that there will be 100 percent occupancy and no social distancing requirements in casinos in Douglas, Elko, Eureka, Humboldt, Lander, Lincoln, Nye, Pershing, Storey and White Pine counties.

Esmeralda County will continue with a 50 percent of fire code occupancy rate, but no social distancing requirements. Lyon County will move to 100 percent occupancy, but 6 feet of social distancing or physical barriers between individuals is required. Carson City will have 100 percent occupancy, but also 6 feet of social distancing.

Gibson said Friday's directive is in preparation for the May 1 transition to local oversight instead of the state to address the battle against the spread of COVID-19.

He noted that individual resort properties can apply directly to the board to waive their county's occupancy rates.

'Another great sign'

Analyst Brendan Bussmann of consultancy firm Global Market Advisors praised the new directive.

"The lifting of capacity shows that Las Vegas is back open for business," Bussmann said.

As capacity constraints lift, visitors will be able to look forward to enjoying a "full experience" heading into the summer, including shows, nightlife and meetings and conventions, he said.

Amanda Belarmino, an assistant professor of hospitality at UNLV, said the loosening restrictions are "another great sign" that Las Vegas' economy is rebounding.

"It's a great day in Nevada to see us able to do what we do best, provide world class service at state of the art casino hotels," she said. "The ability to increase capacity will have a profound impact on our economy and send the message that we are ready for visitors."

The next challenge, Belarmino said, will be to ramp up vaccination and hiring efforts to prepare for the larger crowds.

Bussmann added that the city also faces challenges ahead with increasing airlift into the market.

“However,” he said, “there is no industry that has adapted better and implemented the protocols it needs to provide a safe environment for every guest through additional measures, testing and vaccines.”

On Twitter, Gov. Steve Sisolak did not respond to the change in occupancy rates, but he did note that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommended lifting the pause on the one-shot Janssen COVID-19 vaccination. He indicated Nevada would follow that recommendation.

Sisolak retweeted that the Nevada State Immunization Plan will begin notifying vaccinating partners to resume use of the Janssen vaccine doses in their inventory.

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