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Poker hall closing

State gaming board suspends licenses during investigation

By Beth LeBlanc
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Maverick's Poker Palace and Saloon will be closed after Tuesday.

Manager Mark Berlinger Jr. said the Michigan Gaming Control Board has stopped approving licenses for charities to hold millionaire parties at Maverick's Poker Palace and Saloon at 1639 Garfield St., Port Huron.

"I'm heartbroken. I'm sick to my stomach," Berlinger said.

Richard Kalm, executive director for the Michigan Gaming Control Board, said the board has decided to stop issuing licenses to Maverick's while the organization is under investigation.

Kalm said investigators found that Maverick's and some of the charities holding millionaire parties were in violation of Michigan's Bingo Act, which allows for charitable gaming.

He would not comment on the violations or the charities involved in the investigation.

"We're not going to expose charities to that location until we have better information," Kalm said. "That's not to say we won't issue licenses again in the future."

Berlinger said he was unaware of any violations at his facility.

"I've never been notified of a single violation in this place," he said.

Michigan's Bingo Act allows for non-profits to hold millionaire games — poker tournaments used to raise money for charities.

Charities pay a \$200 licensing fee to register with a poker room. The poker room provides the space, the dealers and gaming supplies; the charity sells the chips and handles the money.

At the end of the night, the charity and poker room share the proceeds 50-50.

Charities can have up to four games a year — each lasting up to four days. Maverick's runs one charity at a time in a four-day slot. The charities are chosen during a lottery in October.

Kalm said the gaming control board issues gaming licenses to charities, not poker rooms. He said Maverick's could continue to operate as a bar if it wished to do so, and charities could get licenses for other approved poker rooms.

Berlinger said he believed the investigations were tied to the owner of the organization, Al Crossnoe.

Crossnoe is owner of both Maverick's and Gloria Poker Palace in Burton. In late October, the Burton poker room became the 16th poker room in the state banned since 2010.

According to a statement from the gaming control board, the Burton location was shut down for allegedly making charities “pay to play.” Charities allegedly were asked to divert some of their proceeds to accounts controlled by owners or agents of the Burton poker room.

Berlinger believes the state has suspended charities from getting licenses at Maverick’s because it also is owned by Crossnoe.

“It’s not necessarily ownership-related,” Kalm said. “It’s basically we’ve found issues at both locations.

“If we have issues with a particular site, regardless of the owner, we’re going to take action.”

Berlinger said Crossnoe is willing to transfer ownership to someone else, but a moratorium against new charitable poker rooms prevents a change in ownership.

Berlinger said he’s worried for the charities that raise money through the poker room, as well as its employees.

“Fifteen more people are going to be out of work a month before Christmas,” Berlinger said.

Organizations including the St. Clair County Sheriff Dive Team, the American Legion and the Port Huron Masonic Lodge use Maverick’s to raise money for equipment, scholarships and other charitable works.

Mark Olson, worshipful master of the Port Huron Masonic Lodge 58, said the group will give away about \$2,000 worth of turkeys and food Dec. 19.

“That’s made possible entirely because of Maverick’s,” he said. “We can’t do this next year if Maverick’s closes.”

Dave Johnson, commander of the American Legion Charles Hammond Post 8, said his group just finished a fund-raising event at Maverick’s Friday.

Johnson said the group uses the profits for scholarships for Port Huron students.

“It’s going to be a loss to us,” Johnson said. “We’re going to have to figure out different ways to fund-raise.”

Dan LaMastus and Whitey Simon, both of the Harsens Island Lions Club, were turned away when they visited Maverick’s Monday to turn in paperwork.

LaMastus said the closing of Maverick’s will hurt the charities the Lions Club supports.

“The sad part is, unfortunately, the current administration supports business more than anything else,” Simon said. “It’s a grab by the casinos to make sure poker rooms aren’t in operation.”

Berlinger said Maverick’s is offering a free buffet and a tournament Tuesday night to thank the community members and charities for their support over Maverick’s four and a half years of operation.

The dinner will begin at 7 p.m., followed at 7:30 p.m. by a \$20 buy-in tournament.

Additional Facts

MAVERICK’S POKER PALACE AND SALOON

Maverick's is offering a free buffet and a tournament Tuesday night for community members and charities. The dinner will begin at 7 p.m., followed by a \$20 buy-in tournament at 7:30 p.m.
