

Once Around the Northwest: Washington Card Rooms Fight Back

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Howdy friends. Most of us are aware that casino gaming has now been allowed on the Indian reservations in Oregon and Washington for approximately five years. Beforehand, gaming (mostly poker) existed in legal card rooms in both states. Though Oregon never developed much of an industry (local laws often excluded or severely hampered club operations) the state of Washington featured more than 100 public card rooms before the establishment of Native American casinos within the state. Many of these closed as business was lost to the larger casinos and the state gaming commission offered little recourse due to the restrictive rules placed upon the clubs. Through a recent series of rulings the card rooms of Washington have finally been allowed to attempt to keep up with the Indian casinos. Though the response from the commission was slow in coming, the new locales are starting to make some headway. Let's take a closer look into what is presently occurring in Washington.

The state gaming commission finally relaxed many of the confining rules the card rooms previously faced. Most critically, these establishments can now offer house-banked card games, formerly allowed only in the native casinos. Clubs are free to deal blackjack, let it ride, pai-gow poker, and Caribbean stud. Roulette and craps are still prohibited in these locales and can only be found currently at the Indian casinos. The state has permitted such card games for just over a year now as I write (November 1998). Limits have also increased during this period so that one can find \$100 maximum blackjack tables at certain clubs, closer to, but not yet even with, the limits found on the reservations. Hours of operation, once strictly limited to a 2:00am closing time across the state, are now much more liberal. Though each club must close for four continuous hours in a 24-hour period, the club can select its own operating times (some close from 4-8am, some from 6-10am, etc.). Club size has also increased in many locations as the commission now allows up to 15 card tables in one building. In addition, traditional card rooms that deal only poker have been permitted a greater amount of freedom in the types of games they deal and the hours they operate.

However, other restrictions significantly influence the type and size of the public card rooms. Clubs which just offer poker are not faced with as many regulations, therefore their overhead remains generally low and I know of many places operating with only one or two tables at any given time. The regulations particularly affect businesses with house-banked games. The commission has been quite picky about handing out these licenses. Clubs which apply for this type of gaming must have a complete security system (overhead cameras and a continuously staffed monitoring facility). The start-up costs, including the cost of the original licenses, easily run into the tens or even hundreds of thousands. Additionally, the normal number of dealers, pit, and shift bosses (not to mention cashiers, waitresses, etc.) must also be present. Therefore, what has emerged are "larger" (ie. 12-15 table) clubs in the more heavily populated areas of the state focussing solely on the casino-type card games. These clubs can better afford the greater overhead as opposed to a one or two table operation, which would still require the same outlay of funds for security systems and licensing fees. Some prominent casino-oriented clubs to open in the past year include Dodge City, Freddie's, Havanas, Mars Hotel, PJ Pockets, Parkers, Players & Spectators, Riverside, Silver Dollar, and Skyway Park. Many of these businesses are former poker rooms remodeled to accommodate the new games; some are brand new casinos. Even more are in the planning stage at present and I know of another handful that will have opened by the time you are reading this.

It seems that this is the wave of the future, at least for the time being, in Washington state and I don't see the trend slowing. I have included a page of illustrations of several chips available from some of newer clubs in Washington.

As a side note, the "northwest" area chip collectors get together a few times a year, usually in either the Seattle or Portland area, to trade and swap stories and updates. If you are interested or if you have any questions, compliments, complaints, or comments, you can reach me at PO Box 3162 Moscow Idaho 83843.