Casinos rap 'phantom' cruise rule

By GREG GARLAND
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Officials of Baton Rouge's two riverboat casinos say they like a proposed "phantom" cruise rule even less than the existing requirement that they sail when water and weather conditions permit.

Belle of Baton Rouge General Manager Denny Bond and Casino Rouge Vice President Carroll Cotten said state and local governments should like it less, too.

The proposal will mean less business for their casinos and less tax revenue for state and local governments because it further restricts when people can get on the boats.

If the proposed rule is approved, boats will still have to cruise when conditions are safe.

But while docked because of unsafe conditions, no one else could board during regular cruising times.

Cotten also said casino boat patrons do not like cruising and will like it even less if they are told they can't get on the boat, even though it is sitting at the dock, because it is on a simulated cruise.

"Our business is fine right now," Cotten said. "If it's not going to be dockside, we would prefer to continue things as they are now. We cruise as often as we feel we can."

State police proposed the phantom cruises to deal with boats that are docked due to dangerous weather or water conditions.

That rule was in effect when the first boats opened, but it was later dropped.

"Just when you think that it's safe to go back into the water, another issue surfaces," Bond lamented. "This is going to affect our attendance more than (cruising) already has."

Bond said phantom cruises would drive gamblers to Indian-run casinos and to permanently docked Mississippi Gulf Coast casinos where they do not have to worry about waiting to get in.

"This is like putting Band-Aids on a problem that needs an operation," Bond said.

"Simulated cruises isn't the issue. The issue is cruising or not cruising. They've got to let the Legislature address this issue."

"The purpose of riverboat gaming was to create revenues for the state," Cotten said.

"They get more revenues when we make more revenues, and this definitely affects the bottom line of the operations of all the boats."