

24-hour card rooms get board approval

By BUD O'BRIEN

Card rooms in the unincorporated areas of Santa Cruz County will be allowed to stay open 24 hours a day, the Board of Supervisors decided last week.

But the board, acutely aware of opposition to the action from portions of the public, as well as from Sheriff Al Noren, included a "sunset clause" in the ordinance. Under terms of the clause, the ordinance will expire on Jan. 1, 1986, at which time, the board made it clear, it won't be renewed if the extended hours are found to be a burden on the sheriff's office, or create other difficulties.

One supervisor, Watsonville's E. Wayne Moore Jr., took an even harder line, saying he would seek to have the ordinance repealed even before it expires if it causes problems.

Moore was one of three supervisors who voted for the change in hours, the others being Gary Patton of Santa Cruz and Dan Forbus of Soquel-Live Oak. Chairwoman Robley Levy, who represents the Midcounty area, and Joe Cucchiara of the San Lorenzo Valley, voted against the change.

Levy had opposed any extension of hours for the card rooms from the time it was first suggested last month. She took the position that such a change would serve no public purpose and said Tuesday her position had been "firmed up" by opposition by Sheriff Noren. Cucchiara said he would vote against it because of numerous phone calls and letters from constituents as well as because of the sheriff's opposition.

Leading the battle for approval was Forbus, who first brought the matter to the board on behalf of the operators of one of the card rooms affected, the Sahara Gardens on Portola Drive.

Forbus noted that the card rooms already operate 20 hours a day, closing only from 2 to 6 a.m. He agreed with the contention of the card room operators that card players who wanted to continue after 2 a.m. would

go either to private homes — where betting limits and other controls would be absent and more money could be lost — or over the hill to Santa Clara County, where the card rooms are open around-the-clock.

Forbus also criticized Sheriff Noren for "waffling" on the issue, noting that Noren had at first taken no position on the matter, and that even though the sheriff now opposes the law, he has admitted there is no evidence that an extension of hours would cause an extra burden on his department.

In fact, Forbus asserted that the new ordinance would give the sheriff more weapons to control activities at the card rooms, including the right to close them down immediately pending a hearing if terms of the ordinance relating to such things as drinking after hours are violated. Forbus noted that virtually all problems now associated with the card rooms occur in connection with alcohol, which cannot legally be served or consumed on the premises after 2 a.m.

Moore, whose chief concern had been the potential law enforcement problem, agreed that card players had a right to their recreation if it didn't impose burdens on other people. He said a provision in the law requiring the card rooms to employ security guards helped persuade him to vote for the change.

Patton voted for the new ordinance without comment. He had previously indicated that his "libertarian instincts" inclined him away from imposing restrictions on individuals unless they are necessary for protection of the public.

But Patton and the other two supporters of the bill made it clear that the onus was on the card room operators to demonstrate that the extra hours would not create new problems.

Actually, only three licensed card rooms are currently operating outside city limits in the county: the Apple Tree in Freedom, the Aptos Card Club in Aptos Village and the Sahara Gardens.