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Pokies dumped by Souths Leagues Club

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The future of South Sydney Leagues Club will depend on a boost in memberships after it decided to remove its 60 poker machines - although the licences will be retained for a "rainy day".

A \$35 million renovation to the club's Redfern premises is expected to begin later this year but the pokies will be sold off, leagues club chairman Bill Alexiou-Hucker says.

He and Souths football club co-owner Peter Holmes a Court fronted reporters at Redfern Town Hall after the board voted 4-3 in support of a pokie-free venue.

The plan gained momentum after Mr Holmes a Court and fellow Souths owner, actor Russell Crowe, proposed the idea in September.

But Mr Alexiou-Hucker said the club would not sell all of the "family silver", instead deciding to retain the machine licences, worth around \$800,000.

"This is new ground we're talking about here and the football club agreed to that," Mr Alexiou-Hucker said of the plan to retain the licences.

"And so we just felt that we didn't want to sell all the family silver, and keep it there for a rainy day."

South Australian independent Senator Nick Xenophon - a long time campaigner against poker machines in state parliament - praised the move and said clubs that go pokie free should be given tax concessions.

"It's a gutsy move," he said.

"I wish them well and I want to do everything I can to give them support at a federal level in terms of getting the tax breaks they deserve and the concessions they deserve to make that shift to a pokies free venue."

The club estimates the machines generate \$150,000 a month in revenue, but Mr Alexiou-Hucker said pokies

don't guarantee a club's success.

"The board felt, with all of the statistics that we have been provided with ... that the poker machines weren't going to be the river of gold that they may once have been," he said.

Research performed for the club show 88 per cent of the population in a three km radius of its premises are 20-44 years old and "young, affluent singles and sharers enjoying single life".

Mr Holmes a Court said increasing membership to the football club would increase patronage of the leagues club and drive up revenues.

"We've watched AFL kick our butt (and) grow to 500,000 members (over the past 10 years) while rugby league has grown to 50,000 members," he said.

"The future of rugby league being strong in NSW is around membership, not poker machines."

He said the club would partner with the Dedes Group to operate the club's restaurant and other facilities once it reopened, following its planned expansion from 1,500 square metres to 2,500 square metres.


Gerard Byrne, who heads The Salvation Army's recovery services for people with drug, alcohol and gambling problems, praised the club's decision but said it would not stop problem gamblers.

"People that are problem gamblers certainly would go and utilise other venues - that's probably happening anyway," Mr Byrne told AAP.

Club members must vote on the no pokies plan before it goes ahead but Souths has received overwhelming public support since September.

The development application to expand the premises is expected to be approved sometime in April, Mr Alexiou-Hucker said.

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