

CASINO TIME AGAIN

Steve Smith, April, 2010

It's silly season again, when all rational discussion of important issues is cast aside for the perennial debate on casinos. Will Massachusetts permit casinos this time around? How many will be allowed? Where will they be located? Will racinos be allowed? How will the Bureau of Indian Affairs rule on the Wampanoag proposals? And those are just the questions that we might eventually have answers for.

We will also hear how the casinos will solve all our economic problems or alternately how we will have traffic gridlock for twenty-five miles in all directions.

The casino debate is where objectivity goes to die. There are such exaggerated claims on both sides that it's hard to know what to believe. Even the language is bent to suit the speakers' needs. If you are anti-casino, you call it gambling, but if you're a proponent, the buzz word is gaming. Will Gambler's Anonymous become Gamers' Anonymous anytime soon?

Despite the tone and ferocity of the debate, we cannot ignore it. Given the tough condition of our economy, the odds of Massachusetts allowing casinos this year have increased. Ironically, if casinos are permitted, the impacts will not be felt for many years and will not help us out of the current economic situation.

Here are some thoughts on what is important and what we should pay attention to in the coming debates.

Demand a Seat at the Table

Middleborough's 2007 agreement with the Mashpee Wampanoags had some serious flaws and Governor Patrick's subsequent legislative proposal was not much better. Setting aside the moral and social dimensions, the casinos that were envisioned were parts of large development proposals that had significant regional impacts – on traffic, housing, the environment, education and the labor force. These are all impacts that spill across city and town lines, yet the Middleborough/Wampanoag agreement ignored the regional reality and shut the neighboring communities out completely. This was wrong.

The Governor's bill gave the state in the primary role to negotiate and distribute benefits and mitigation, with little acknowledgement of the fact that the closest municipalities would bear the greatest impact. Fixing a deteriorating bridge in Dracut, while it may be a worthwhile goal, does not address the problems caused by casino generated traffic in neighboring Lakeville. The Governor's plan did not address that inequity.

The obvious solution is to provide a seat at the negotiating table for the communities immediately surrounding the casino to insure that the benefits are primarily used to offset the negative impacts from the facility itself. The state cannot view casinos as a statewide bailout.

What are the impacts?

In order to evaluate and plan for impacts, objective data and information are needed. Any state legislative package to address casinos in the state should provide for an objective third party to gather and present the data. Here are some of the impacts we need to be concerned about.

Traffic

A large resort casino can generate as many as 50,000 vehicle trips per day, a number that would truly bring gridlock to road segments and intersections that don't have the capacity to accommodate that much traffic. This problem can be solved by getting accurate trip numbers, assigning their origins and destinations through a traffic model (something SRPEDD can do), identifying the problem areas and getting the casino development to pay for them to be fixed.

The good news is that casino traffic is generally spread out over a 24/7 time period, so there are fewer peaks than you would normally get with a different type of development, such as a shopping mall.

Housing

Workers need housing and lower wage workers (which casinos employ a lot of) need affordable housing. Once again, this is a regional, not a local, problem. A casino in a rural or isolated location puts the housing burden on neighboring communities, especially nearby cities with large housing inventories.

Education

School systems in Connecticut around Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun saw explosions in non-English speaking students directly attributed to the casino workforce. This can amount to a significant cost.

Economic Impact and Jobs

Any casino will undoubtedly employ hundreds and maybe thousands of workers, and the proponents will trumpet that fact. But the real challenge is to accurately determine the net gain. Many claim that a large casino with its self contained subsidized restaurants, hotel rooms and entertainment will cause closings of competing businesses in the area. The net jobs figure, not the gross one, is the important one here. The potential for beneficial spinoff is why many prefer a casino in an urban location that already has hotel room and restaurant seats rather than a self contained resort casino.

Environment

The usual environmental questions about wetlands, aquifers and endangered species need to be asked and answered. The state MEPA (Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act) process does the job well, but Native American casinos are exempt unless they voluntarily agree to go through the MEPA process.

Public Safety

More people will mean more crime, more traffic accidents and more work for the local police force and the surrounding communities. There should be no dispute about this, but accurately measuring it is another issue.

Who gets the money?

The big attraction of a casino is the potential payout – not just to the gamblers, but to the state and local governments. The licensing fees and the state take from the slots amount to big dollars, and who gets them will determine winners and losers. It is critical that writers of legislation and regulations follow the principle that the distribution of the goodies should bear some relationship to the areas shouldering the greatest impacts.

The debate is on, so step up and place your bets. Will we have a Native American casino, state licensed casinos, one or more racinos or nothing at all? If you have a crystal ball and know the answers, you could make a lot more than if you stayed at the blackjack table for a week on a winning streak.