

Hartford Courant

Towns Must Weigh Gambling's Consequences

By Kent J. Siladi
January 28, 2017

As people of faith, the members of the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ have joined with others throughout the state to form the Coalition Against Casino Expansion in Connecticut. We are concerned that the economic and social impact of gambling has unintended consequences for some of the most vulnerable in our state. We must examine, on personal and social levels, the real, long-term benefits of what superficially appears as gain.

State Rep. Scott Storms, R-Windsor Locks, has filed bills that would require a municipality considering a casino to examine the economic and social impact of gambling on its region and to approve the casino by referendum before it is established. The bills deserve support considering efforts by the Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan tribes to persuade the legislature to legalize off-reservation commercial casinos and to allow them to jointly open a \$200 million to \$300 million "convenience" casino in Windsor Locks or East Windsor.

The tribes have experienced slumping revenues at Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun because of increasing cross-border competition. They want the new casino to help keep their current Connecticut customers from going to the \$950 million MGM casino being built in Springfield and to expand the market for casino gambling in Connecticut by attracting new in-state customers.

The tribes commissioned a study that contends the proposed casino would protect thou-

sands of casino-related Connecticut jobs and \$70 million in annual tax revenue. The study does not address, however, the casino's economic and social costs, which any balanced and objective study would be required to do.

Here are some reasons the casino's costs would be likely to heavily outweigh its benefits over time:

With the Northeast facing a growing casino glut, it is highly questionable whether the new casino could meet its goals. A 2016 study by the Nelson Rockefeller Institute of Government warns that although new casinos may generate short-run increases in public revenue, that revenue can quickly reverse and decline.

More than half of Connecticut's casino revenue originally came from out-of-staters, who brought new money to the state. Those customers have declined and a convenience casino won't bring them back. As a result, jobs and revenue produced by the proposed casino would be funded overwhelmingly by the gambling losses of Connecticut residents, which would merely redistribute existing money within the state without generating economic growth.

State-sponsored casino gambling represents a regressive tax on low-wage earners and the elderly, deepening and not alleviating the state's economic problems.

Casinos spread gambling addiction, which leads to debt, bankruptcies, broken families, embezzlement and other crime. The National Council of Problem Gambling estimates that one in five gambling addicts attempts suicide, a rate higher than for any other addiction.

Multiple studies show that 35 percent to 50 percent of casino gambling revenue comes from problem and pathological gamblers. In other words, the casino industry's business model is dependent upon preying on people with gambling problems.

Legalizing commercial casino gambling would open the door to additional casinos and other forms of gambling in Connecticut, including neighborhood slots parlors, internet gambling and sports betting.

According to a landmark report from the Institute for American Values, a non-partisan think tank, local and regional casinos drain wealth from communities, weaken nearby businesses, hurt property values, and reduce civic participation, family stability, and other forms of social capital that are at the heart of a successful community.

If Connecticut lawmakers need any other reasons to be concerned about the potential costs of the proposed casino, they need only look at New Jersey, which has had more experience with casinos than any state in the Northeast. On Nov. 8, its residents voted 4-1 against a proposal to expand casino gambling beyond Atlantic City, reflecting the overwhelming view that casinos are an economic and social dead end for New Jersey.

Trying to bail out Connecticut's casinos by building another one is a sure sign that casino gambling has become a dead end for our state, as well. A quick fix is not a solution for the economic challenges we face.

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