

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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What about Casinos?

Casino mania has consumed Massachusetts this summer. Middleboro selectmen signed a contract with the newly recognized Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe; Palmer officials are negotiating with Connecticut's Mohegan Tribe. And Chicopee is talking about inviting a casino into that city.

One significant roadblock stands in the way of these plans – casinos are not legal in Massachusetts. Governor Patrick has taken the summer to decide whether to support casino gambling. Even that endorsement will not allow such activity unless the legislature changes state law.

I will fight against a bill authorizing casinos, and these are some of the reasons for my opposition.

Where casino backers see the glamour of Las Vegas and Foxwoods, I see the streets of Atlantic City. Where they see the photographs of giddy million-dollar slot machine winners, I see the losers who spent the mortgage money on one more sure bet.

Where host communities may see millions of dollars in new revenue, I see regional towns forced to pay for additional public services required to handle increased traffic, crime, and other attendant social costs.

Where investors see a towering casino city, I see the city of Springfield losing any hope of renewal when a casino is just over the bridge or down the Pike.

One sure thing about casino is that they will make money. Backers promise to create a \$1 billion attraction, and they expect a good return on their investment. Where will their profits come from? Ideally the money will come from discretionary of local and out-of-town patrons. Money that might otherwise be spent on shopping, movies, restaurants, or other pursuits will go to casino entertainment.

Much of the money, however, will come from essential family income and even beyond. As far as we are from the Connecticut casinos, our courts now deal with charges of embezzlement brought against individuals who needed just a little more money for the slots.

Where will the money go? Communities that are currently negotiating with backers anticipate contracts to compensate them for the ventures. No provision is made for the impact of high-traffic establishments on neighboring towns. A new state law is likely to pull much revenue into Boston and redistribute it throughout the state, leaving host regions without much reward for putting up casino trade.

“Casino creep” is another likely result of legalized gaming venues. Racetracks have long sought permission to operate slot machines, and that permission would surely accompany any new gaming law. If the state authorizes commercial casinos, Tribes can open their own casinos on tribal land. They are under no obligation to pay any of their profits to Massachusetts because of their tribal sovereignty.

The people and the state will pay many costs of a gamble on gaming.
The House never loses.