
Las Vegas SUN

February 02, 2004

Opposition to Indian casinos stiffens

By Iver Peterson

NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Connecticut's two large Indian casinos pump \$400 million into state and local treasuries each year, but so many residents dislike the casinos that the state's Legislature repealed the law that allowed them to be built.

In New York, Buffalo has a shot at a new casino to help revive its sagging downtown and bring in new cash. But residents oppose the idea.

Throughout the Northeast and across the country, casinos hold out the promise of easy money to balance budgets, cut taxes and increase school spending. Yet in an odd inversion of the usual public eagerness for new investment and more jobs, opposition to Indian casinos is, if anything, picking up strength in some areas.

It is a situation Mayor Anthony M. Masiello of Buffalo knows well. He has been working for more than two years to attract an Indian casino already authorized by the state Legislature for his city or for surrounding Erie County, but voters in public opinion polls and those he meets on the street oppose it.

"What is shocking to me is that, if you had any other company that was going to employ 2,500 people and pay them \$30,000 a year and up and generate millions of dollars in private investment, people would be falling all over them," Masiello said in an interview. "I don't know what the big deal is."

Nowhere is the anti-casino sentiment stronger than in Connecticut, where officials from Gov. John G. Rowland on down are in an uproar over the Bureau of Indian Affairs' decision last week to grant federal recognition to the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation of Kent.

The Schaghticoques (SKAT-a-cokes) have not yet said they want a casino, only "economic development." But few officials doubt they will want their own casino on the New York border, and as a newly sovereign tribe, they are beyond the reach of state and local controls, and under federal law are able to force the state to negotiate a casino compact with them.

Last year, the Connecticut General Assembly repealed the charity gambling law that allowed Indian tribes to build casinos and also permitted churches and other charitable endeavors to raise money by holding "Las Vegas nights." But Rowland has said he would appeal the recognition of the Schaghticoques just the same, a statement that tribal leaders interpreted as anti-Indian, not anti-casino or anti-gambling.

"It's very unfortunate they took a people who are one of the first families of the state and turned this into a gaming issue," Richard L. Velky, the chief of the Schaghticoques, said of the governor and his staff. "They don't care about our culture, history, or survival. It's bordering on racist."

A major element driving the opposition to Indian casinos, particularly where they already exist, is the

question of Indian sovereignty. There is the perception that a huge financial windfall is going to people who many believe are not any different from society at large, or who have not suffered disproportionately, said Bennett Liebman, coordinator of the program on racing and wagering at Albany Law School.

"In spite of what casinos may be paying to the state, it seems very little compared to the benefits they give to a very few tribal members," Liebman said.

When the tribes are not part the gambling debate, popular attitudes toward existing casinos are more favorable, as in the debate in New Jersey, where the Atlantic City casinos are commercial ventures that are taxed, regulated and audited in a way that tribal casinos could never be.

A 1999 poll of New Jersey residents by the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute found widespread approval of Atlantic City casino gambling, both for the hundreds of millions of dollars it pays to the state, and because the big resorts are perceived as improving the state's national image.

But this is not necessarily the case in upstate New York. The Oneida Indian Nation's Turning Stone Casino in Verona is just about the only business generating new jobs and income, but the Oneidas' sovereignty, including their exemption from zoning laws and their tax-free gas and cigarette sales, has produced a strong anti-casino, or anti-Indian, reaction, although hardly a universal one.

"Truthfully, we have people on both sides of the line," said Peter F. LaMacchia, professor of gaming and casino management at Morrisville State College outside Syracuse and a consultant for Turning Stone and other casinos. The president of the Connecticut Alliance Against Casino Expansion, Jeff Benedict, maintained in an interview that morality has little do to with the gambling debate anymore. "It used to be that politicians would not touch gambling because it was morally stigmatized, but that's not true anymore," Benedict said. "The stigma now is political: Do you want to be associated with an industry that has literally trampled on the rights of voters and the community in which it lives? The answer is no."

According to the National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling, there were 45 efforts to introduce or expand gambling in 30 states last year, and all but three of them failed. New Jersey's governor, James E. McGreevey, backed away from a proposal to put slot machines in racetracks.

But the biggest gambling initiatives in the New York region are still moving ahead. Slot machines were recently installed at the Saratoga racetrack, and the Seneca Indians in western New York will soon open their second of the six Indian casinos that Gov. George E. Pataki plans for New York state.

[Las Vegas SUN main page](#)

Questions or problems? [Click here.](#)

All contents copyright 2004 Las Vegas SUN, Inc.