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LONG ISLAND TOPIC

If you get a casino, keep some winnings

BY BARBARA LOMBARDO

Barbara Lombardo is managing editor of The Saratogian, a daily newspaper in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

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April 11, 2004

About 150 people rooted Cosmo Hanover to victory or ripped up another ticket on a recent wet Wednesday night after the third race at Saratoga Gaming and Raceway.

A few yards away, more than 400 people were as oblivious to the rain as to the live harness racing taking place beyond a set of unmarked doors. This crowd, which grew as the night wore on, was there to play the slots.

It's been two full months since the doors opened at New York State's first racino, greeting gamblers with more than 1,300 machines. If some officials get their way, Long Island will get a piece of the action too.

As part of a plan to raise more money for education, Gov. George Pataki wants to allow video lottery terminals at other locations in the state. Right now, the law permits the machines at eight existing racetracks, including Saratoga. Under Pataki's proposal, the slot casinos could be built at places other than racetracks. And his plan gets specific: There would be eight, up to five of which could be built in New York City.

The Nassau and Suffolk Off-Track Betting corporations are lobbying hard for the chance at building some. Should that happen, let me share some insight on what you on Long Island can do better.

Learn from our mistakes, and try to get some of the winnings.

So far, the Saratoga Springs I know and love has not fallen apart, as some predicted when the slots came in. Nor has it improved, although the county might have tried harder to see some revenue in exchange for allowing the racino to come in.

The beauty of a windowless room containing row after row of gambling machines is in the eye of the beholder. This form of entertainment is not for everyone. It's not for me. It is, however, for thousands of other people, mostly from this area, who during the four weeks of February in the middle of an upstate New York winter plunked more than \$80 million into the machines.

Not plunked, exactly. You silently slide your greenback into these babies. And they're technically not slot machines: The state circumvents its own constitutional ban of casino gambling by calling them "gaming machines" or "video lottery terminals," linking them

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with horse racing and earmarking the money for education.

The lottery terminals do look like slot machines: bar- bar-bar, five lemons or a variation on those themes. But instead of coins cascading into your winnings bucket, the machines spit out vouchers. Some of the thousands who pour into the casino between 10 a.m. and 2 a.m. seven days of week miss the chink-a- chink that pervades "real" casinos, but others are content with the simulated sound of clanging coins.

The machines, to me, are boring, possibly addictive and a shameful way for government to fund itself. But if ordinary folks are willing to cough up millions of dollars to play, why shouldn't the state encourage them to cough into its coffers?

Video gaming is sprouting around New York to fatten the state budget. A racino opened last month at Buffalo Raceway, and others are scheduled to open elsewhere upstate and in Yonkers. Aqueduct is also trying to open one.

Saving the dying harness track was the rationale of county lawmakers who overwhelmingly approved the Saratoga Springs racino. A survey prior to the vote found city residents welcomed the gaming machines with the understanding that proceeds would boost prize money for harness racing. But they wouldn't be any more interested in harness racing than they already were, which wasn't very much.

Local government doesn't get a dime from the racino profits, which in two months netted \$12.7 million. Not even a penny goes toward the wear and tear from the increased traffic. The state didn't offer to negotiate, and the county didn't demand it. The county rolled over, afraid to turn down the project and kill the harness industry.

After the county gave its approval, the state changed the rules regarding hours of operation, how profit is shared and where else gaming machines will be allowed.

Sure, there are new jobs, but not enough of the kind needed in this city, where businesses already compete for low-wage, low-skill workers.

We'll have to see what happens as the weather warms and the tourist season heats up, especially when Belmont closes for six weeks of summertime thoroughbred racing at Saratoga Race Course, across the street from the racino. Whether video lottery players stick to the racino or spread their spending to restaurants and shops in Saratoga's lively, upscale downtown a couple of miles away remains to be seen.

Also yet to be determined is how much harness racing prize money will be beefed up. Racino-generated increases in the prizes are the key to bringing more and better horses. For the first time in ages, the barns are full in anticipation of better payouts because the track, bringing in more revenue from the racino, can afford them.

Perhaps with time - and the impending addition of signs in the casino directing people to the track - the racetrack stands will be full, too. I'd love to see that. But I'm not betting on it.

Insiders say it could be months before we know if Pataki's plan for the eight new casinos becomes reality. If negotiations allow it to happen, the better option for Long Island might be for OTB to run the casinos as opposed to a private operator such as Donald Trump or MGM. This is because officials at the county public benefit corporations promise that part of the revenue would be earmarked for local government.

Saratoga taxpayers came up empty-handed, but if some of this money goes back to municipalities, Long Island could be holding a winning ticket.

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