



SPEAK OUT

Gambling Expansion: Not Just a Minnesota Issue Anymore

by John McCarthy

Almost everyone in America has been affected by the current recession, and Indian tribes are no exception. Tribal gaming revenues are down in many locations, and some tribes are deferring new construction projects or infrastructure improvements until the economy picks up.

Unfortunately, a new wave of economic losses could be on the horizon for tribes. Virtually every state in the nation is facing huge budget deficits, and many believe the solution is state-sponsored gambling. The state of Minnesota is one of them.

Almost since the day the compacts were signed, some Minnesota legislators have been trying to get into the gambling business. Since 1994, Minnesota tribes have fought and defeated proposals to authorize slot machines in bars, at the airport and at the racetrack. These proposals always have lacked strong public support. In the past, Minnesotans have shown little appetite for a dramatic increase in the amount of gambling in the state.

However, the budget situation has created a tough choice

for state residents. Do they want to pay more taxes, or do they want to find new revenue sources? Minnesotans, like most people, hate the idea of tax increases, so the legislature is exploring new revenue sources. That's where the expansion of gambling comes in.

The most serious proposal would authorize slot machines at Canterbury Park, the thoroughbred racetrack located about a mile from the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community's Mystic Lake Casino.

Tribal leaders in Minnesota always have recognized that expansion is almost impossible to stop, once it starts. There is not a single state in the U.S. that ever has cut back on gambling after it was authorized. Instead, states add more and more gambling because there is an unending demand for more money.

The best proof of this reality is the number of gambling proposals currently under discussion. At least eighteen states are considering some form of gambling expansion, according to the March 22 *Washington Times*, including:

- Ohio, where the legislature is considering allowing slot machines at the state's seven racetracks, and now bowling alleys are demanding they be given slots, too.
- Pennsylvania, where Governor Rendell is promoting legislation to allow table games after casinos failed to close the state's budget hole.
- Colorado, where policy makers are considering expanding slot machine operations to allow table games, 24-hour gambling, and higher bet limits in Denver.
- Florida, where Miami officials are demanding the right to install slot machines at the airport to raise more revenue for Dade County.
- Massachusetts, Maryland and Missouri, which are considering proposals to allow slot machines at racetracks (racinos).

In most of these states, Indian tribes already have established gaming operations. Yet I'm betting that not one governor or legislator has initiated contact with those tribes to find out how state-sponsored competition might affect tribal casinos or government operations.

This is an old, familiar story to Native Americans. There is one immutable law of American history: Indian people never get to keep anything of value for very long. When Indian gaming began in 1990, few people believed it would be successful. After all, who believed Indian tribes could operate casinos or attract customers?

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Tribes proved those skeptics wrong, and Indian gaming took off like a rocket. Now, after twenty years, some states believe gambling is the ultimate solution for their growing fiscal problems.

There are several other factors that contribute to the eagerness of state governments to get into direct competition with gaming tribes. First, there is a widespread misperception that all tribes are wealthy because a few have done well. The common notion is that “the tribes can afford to take a hit.”

Second, many people still believe that gambling is an unlimited source of cash, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. If it were, Nevada wouldn't be facing the same kind of budget crisis that Minnesota is facing.

Third, state-sponsored competition is seen by some states as a way to get money from tribes that don't have compacts requiring revenue-sharing.

Finally, there will always be those who resent the “special advantages” that Indian tribes possess by way of their sovereignty. Those who believe that “everyone should be treated the same” should have made their views known when Indian people were living in Third World conditions, without jobs, education, health care or hope.

In Minnesota, racino proponents often declare that they only want “a level playing field.” What they don't acknowledge is that Indian gaming has finally given Native Americans a level playing field – or at least, greater access to that field.

Racino proponents also claim that they're seeking “just one casino.” That's another fallacy. The tsunami of expansion proposals we just described is proof that no state ever stops at “one casino.” The effects of this global recession will be with us for years, and so will the federal and state deficits they have produced. Once the floodgates are opened, there will be no stopping wave after wave of state-sponsored gambling.

Tribes must fight these proposals with all the resources at our disposal. We can't afford to sit back and let state governments

undermine the only revenue-generating tool we have. We may lose the battle in Minnesota, but you can rest assured that we'll go down fighting every step of the way. ♣

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