

Editorial: Let's not make New Hampshire the Casino State

Written by Administrator
Sunday, 28 April 2013 06:32 -

Think of Vermont, and you picture Holsteins and maple syrup; Maine, lobsters and lighthouses on a rocky coast. As for New Hampshire, even before the Old Man of the Mountain did a face plant on the floor of the notch, the state had a branding problem – so much so that in 2010 the state hired a Florida marketing company to help it come up with a slogan or image that would draw tourists to the state. That campaign, like many before it, was a flop.

That means, should the New Hampshire House say yes to a casino, it will be an out-of-state gambling company's marketing department that brands the state. Think of Connecticut, and what comes to mind first? Casinos. Ads for the giant Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods resorts are hard to escape. What will it mean if people come to think casino when they think New Hampshire? The state's tourist mix will change. It will have more single young people and people over 50, the mainstay of the casino business, and fewer families. The change will be to the detriment of a state whose image and economy have long been based on its being a beautiful, family-friendly place to enjoy the glory of the great outdoors, not the glitz of a casino.

Say "yes" to a New Hampshire casino and there will be an ad war, not just with the Connecticut casinos, which have seen a steady decline in business, but with the three new mega-casinos approved by Massachusetts. The investment in each of those will be double or triple the \$425 million that New Hampshire is requiring that a casino developer invest. It's a war New Hampshire will lose.

Massachusetts gamblers won't drive north to a second-rate venue when they can go to the \$1.2 billion palace Las Vegas casino owner Steve Wynn plans to build on the Mystic River in Everett, Mass. A New Hampshire casino will primarily empty the pockets of New Hampshire residents. That's why, among other reasons, Nicolette Clark, who runs the Capitol Center for the Arts, joined with the directors of The Music Hall in Portsmouth, the Lebanon Opera House and the Colonial Theatre in Keene to oppose the casino proposal. It's why the state's 600-member hospitality association came out against casino gambling this month.

Casinos spend a fortune to attract customers and as much or more to keep them coming. They issue rewards cards and vouchers for meals and hotel stays. They suffuse casinos with enticing aromas, and they program slot machines to show near-wins to keep people playing, and do all they can to up the house's take. They are not in business to help other businesses.

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The hit to existing businesses, and New Hampshire's image, of a casino in Salem – “high-end and highly-regulated” as Gov. Maggie Hassan claims, or more likely mid-grade and modestly-regulated – would only be the beginning. UNH professor Andrew Leitz, chairman of the Governor's Gaming Study Commission, former governor John Lynch and Tom Sedoric, veteran head of the commission that advises the state's Department of Resources and Economic Development, are among those who say there's no way to stop the proliferation of casinos once they start. The state's dependence on casino revenue and the power of the gambling lobby in the Legislature will guarantee that.

Say yes to casino gambling and the state's new motto might as well be “Come to New Hampshire, where we'll empty your pockets before you make it to the lakes or the mountains.”

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