

When Cape Girardeau voters go the polls Nov. 2, they will be making choices on key elective offices, statewide issues and one matter of singular importance to the city: whether or not Cape Girardeau should have a casino. Because the benefits appear to strongly outweigh the concerns, the Southeast Missourian encourages voters to say yes.

This endorsement takes into account that many

voters, our friends and neighbors, oppose a casino because they are, for their own good reasons, against gambling. These decent folks have been sharing their opposition through letters, Speak Out comments and advertisements. If their arguments are persuasive, a majority of voters will say no, and that will put an end to the possibility that Missouri's last gaming license would go to the Isle of Capri, whose proposal for a casino in Cape Girardeau appears to be the front-runner among the three proposals under consideration by the Missouri Gaming Commission.

However, we believe killing the possibility of a major development in the downtown would be a serious lost opportunity, which is why we join the boards of the Cape Girardeau Area Chamber of Commerce, Old Town Cape, Cape Girardeau Area Magnet, the Cape Girardeau City Council, the Cape Girardeau Firefighters Association and the Cape Girardeau Police Officers Association in favor of the development. These are friends and neighbors too, and the entities they represent, we believe, also have the best interests of our community at heart.

A huge impact

The Isle of Capri casino, expected to attract a million visitors a year, would make a massive \$125 million investment in its Cape Girardeau facility, bringing jobs and an influx of investment during the construction period. Once in operation, the casino would create 450 or more permanent jobs. And the casino would produce millions of dollars in revenue for state and local governments.

In addition, the city would benefit almost immediately from land sales if Isle of Capri gets a license for a Cape Girardeau casino. Isle would pay \$2 million for 11 acres owned by the city along North Main Street. Half would be used to improve the Broadway corridor, with the remainder to be used for capital projects throughout the community and \$323,000 going into the city's emergency reserve fund. This represents an immediate revenue windfall from a blighted stretch of property that otherwise generates little positive for the community. The city has appropriately put a plan together for this initial influx of money if the casino is approved by voters and the gaming commission.

After it opens its doors, it is estimated a casino would generate nearly \$3 million a year for Cape Girardeau and surrounding entities: \$2.5 million in casino tax revenue to be shared by the city and schools and another \$500,000 that would be dedicated to downtown improvements through a new Riverfront Fund generated from gross gaming revenue and sales taxes. For those still deliberating how to vote on this issue, where else can such funds realistically be raised for capital improvements, schools and jobs here? This is a unique opportunity to develop this area and benefit the entire community, which if missed, is unlikely to re-emerge anytime soon in any form.

Two constituencies

There are essentially two constituencies in the casino debate. One considers gaming to be a spending choice much like other forms of entertainment: sporting events, concerts, nightclubs, Broadway shows, museums. This constituency says how it spends its money is a matter of individual choice, and many choose to spend money at casinos by gambling, dining and seeing shows put on by big-name performers. Some people in this camp already visit casinos, but they do it elsewhere. They argue a local casino would not only keep some local dollars from leaking out of the community, but it would draw new people -- and investment -- into town that otherwise would never come.

The other constituency takes the view that gaming companies are the only big winners, and they only win because their customers lose. This view doesn't take into account the entertainment value many casino-goers get from the money they spend. In addition, in arguing against a casino, this constituency focuses primarily on the gambling addict. Such arguments are compelling to a point, but similar arguments can be made for many activities: driving is dangerous to those who go too fast; drinking is dangerous to those who drink to excess; TV and video games are debilitating to those who watch too much or who lose control of their play; the Internet can be destructive because of its easy access to porn.

A big carrot

Over the past few decades, a majority of Missourians -- through several votes -- have supported the idea of various forms of gambling to provide fun and government revenue. Bingo was approved. The lottery was approved. Casino gaming was approved. And local communities were given the option of voting to allow or not allow a casino, knowing that some communities would approve and others might not. Thus, casino gambling will take place in Missouri; the

central question is whether we want it here.

Those who oppose a casino for Cape Girardeau contend that many who have endorsed the Isle of Capri casino plan are simply being lured by a big financial carrot. Without the enticement of significant tax revenue, new jobs, additional development funds and an enhanced draw to visitors, they argue, city leaders would have rejected this opportunity.

We agree. Why should the city suffer the risks to community relationships where good people disagree about the issue of gambling -- unless the return is significant? The "carrot issue," then, is one of weighing the pluses and minuses, something city officials, the chamber, Old Town Cape and Cape Girardeau Area Magnet have done through extensive research.

Opponents say having a casino would result in an increase in crime: prostitution, rape, robbery. But that's not the case in other cities where casinos have located. In fact, casino proponents legitimately make the opposite argument, pointing to increased security and safety as a result of casino developments. The one area where a clear negative exists is in the increase of gambling addictions. The state already dedicates a portion of casino revenue to gambling assistance programs, and Isle of Capri has established programs to identify and prevent the problem gambler as well as a strong track record in donating to community service agencies. If a casino does come to Cape Girardeau, we expect our town, in part using resources from the state gaming commission and from Isle of Capri, will create support systems and partnerships for those who have a proclivity to addiction and for those who succumb to it.

Boon for downtown

Without a development like the one proposed by Isle of Capri, Cape Girardeau's downtown will struggle harder and longer to achieve its vision to rehabilitate and develop and there is no certainty it could ever develop a similar attraction. For many voters, the choice is clear: a casino would be a tremendous benefit to Cape Girardeau. Many other voters believe a casino would be detrimental.

Whatever the outcome of next month's vote, let's hope that supporters and opponents accept the voters' decision. Cape Girardeau is a special city. Both sides care deeply about their community. Cape Girardeau's best interests will be served by moving forward after Nov. 2.

The casino vote - Southeast Missourian

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