



How will gambling affect Crawford County?

By Keith Gushard

02/25/07— Crawford County is out of the immediate danger zone, but not immune to the effects of casino gambling, according to addictions researcher John Welte. However, Judge Mark Farrell of Amherst, N.Y., who has seen a rise in gambling-related crimes in his region, may disagree.

It seems gambling's good or bad effect on nearby communities can be debated strongly from either side of the argument. Residents of northwestern Pennsylvania will soon be drawing their own conclusions with Wednesday's planned opening of Presque Isle Downs, a 2,000-video-slot-machine casino and racetrack outside of Erie.

While about three percent of the nation's population that gambles are considered to be problem or compulsive gamblers, Welte's research has shown it's the proximity of a casino that has an influence on the increase in the number of problem gamblers.

"Of people who live within 10 miles of a casino, about 7 percent (of people who gambled) were problem gamblers," said Welte, a researcher with the State University of New York at Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions. "For those who live beyond 10 miles, only 3 percent of the population were problem gamblers."

That's not to say there aren't persons with addictive gambling problems in Crawford County, but the predicted percentage problem gamblers shouldn't increase with Presque Isle Downs' opening.

The northern part of Crawford County is about 20 miles from Presque Isle Downs and Meadville itself is 30 miles away.

"People become problem gamblers versus their distance from the casino," Welte said. "But beyond 10 miles, we found no effect (on the increase)."

Welte's numbers are based on a random national survey of persons age 18 or older, with more than 2,600 responses. Of those surveyed, 82.2 percent had gambled in the past year and 3 percent were considered problem gamblers.

Using Welte's parameters, based on U.S. Census data of persons over age 18 in Crawford County — 69,943 people with 57,493 gambling — at 3 percent some 1,738 residents would be the number of potential problem gamblers in the county.

But casino gambling can have spill-over effects on other communities. Just ask Judge Mark Farrell of Amherst, N.Y.

"I've had bankers, real estate people, part-owners of a small business, doctors, lawyers (in court) on crimes related to feed their gambling habits," Farrell said.

Like Crawford County, Amherst is relatively close to a casino. It's about 20 miles from the Niagara Falls area — where there are now three casinos. It's also 10 miles from Buffalo where another gambling casino recently opened.

"Before the casinos came in five to 10 years ago, people didn't have a place to go gamble other than the lottery," Farrell said. "Now, it's created a whole genre or attitude. We're seeing people live out the proclivity to gamble."

Both Welte and Farrell agree gambling cuts across all economic classes, but those in the lowest social economic classes are hit hardest.

Welte said research showed those in the lowest 20 percent of income had 5.3 percent problem gamblers while it was only 1.6 percent for those in the highest 20 percent of income brackets.

Officials in Erie County know casino gambling has two sides to it and have been making preparations.

The Erie City Mission, a social services agency in Erie, is having two counselors trained this year specifically in gambling addiction.

“We’ve not seen a whole lot of it yet,” said Susan Williams, director of Erie City Mission’s clinical services. “We usually get a couple calls a year, but we’re expecting more.”

“We’ve gone in (supporting gambling) with our eyes wide open,” said Jake Rouch, president of the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership.

Economic promise?

“On the upside, first and foremost is job creation with a wide range of jobs from family-sustaining to minimum wage,” Rouch said.

Some 650 jobs have been created at Presque Isle Downs casino and another 250 to 300 jobs are expected when the horse racing track opens later this fall.

The casino and race track are expected to pump millions of dollars in to the region’s economy and tax base as the region becomes a destination, Rouch said. (Two local economic leaders also shared their views; see related story.)

“We do know there are going to be (social) costs, too,” Rouch said. “We don’t want to see addiction to gaming. We think there’s a strong social service network to combat it.”

John Brabender, spokesman for Presque Isle Downs, said casino staff has been intensely trained to watch for problem gamblers. Also, there is a problem gambler self-identification program that people can join that bars the person from the casino.

Safety also will be a major concern for the casino — for both patrons and the games themselves, Brabender said. He couldn’t go into detail about security measures, but said patrons will be secure.

Brad Foulk, Erie County’s district attorney, told the Tribune that he’s not convinced totally that gambling will bring an increase in crime.

“There may be an increase in crime because of the influx of people,” he said. “It has to do with the number of people. Whether you can link that to gaming is another issue. My office is committed to making sure this operation is safe and is not associated with criminal activity.”

Keith Gushard can be reached at 724-6370 or by e-mail at kgushard@meadvilletribune.com.

Copyright © 1999-2006 cnhi, inc.

Photos



Shelley Buehler, the architect for the Presque Isle Downs Casino, gives a tour of the inside of the facility Saturday morning. The casino is showing off what it has to offer with two special days for United Way guests and supporters, with the proceeds going to the organization, followed by the scheduled opening Wednesday.