

Table games still bad bet

By Linda Hoffman / Guest Columnist

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In 1996, Penn National's Peter Carlino stated, "We're committed to building thoroughbred racing. ... We are not a casino," according to the Morning Herald, March 27, 1996. In 1997, Charles Town Races & Slots installed 400 video lottery machines and today it has more than 5,000 slots. Now it wants us to approve poker, black jack, roulette, craps and so on. Where will it end?

There are many valid arguments against table games: traffic, crime and the social costs of addiction - bankruptcy, divorce and suicide. At the heart of the issue are two words: trust and power.

Can we trust the promises of those who have so much to gain? In 1996, when slots were legalized, many were swayed by the promise of money for our schools. It became apparent that PNGI was not giving any money to Jefferson County schools; the funds were dispersed throughout the state. Now it's promising to give money to our schools for capital improvements.

It's likely that the state will cut our funds accordingly, and we will have gained nothing.

Can we believe that Penn National has West Virginia's interests at heart when it spent millions to help pass gambling amendments in Maryland and Ohio? How reliable are its claims of being a "good neighbor" when it was planning to sell its corporation to a hedge fund during the last table games election? What can we expect in the future?

We are being asked to trust that table games will help our economy. Warren Buffett says gambling does not benefit the economy. He fought the legalization of gambling in his home state of Nebraska. Likewise, the U.S. International Gambling Report recently cited 40 economists who oppose gambling because "economic costs are likely to far outweigh the benefits." Should we trust Buffett and the economists, or Penn National?

How will our restaurants and hotels fare when they can't compete with the free drinks, meals and hotel rooms "comped" by the all-inclusive casino?

What about the promise of well-paying jobs? Most of these are actually dependent on tips. How many of these jobs are cleaning the 500 hotel rooms in the resort complex promoted during the first campaign (that I heard referred to as "The Towers" by a track official)?

Since the introduction of table games at Mountaineer Park, there have been 300 layoffs, purses have been cut and track owners want to eliminate four months from the racing calendar. Similar results would endanger the 3,600 existing jobs in the local horse industry.

Concerns about crime are confirmed by the West Virginia Problem Gamblers Help Network. According to its 2008 report, nearly a third of the callers have committed illegal acts (e.g. forgery, fraud, theft, or embezzlement) to finance gambling.

In the article, Table Games Elections: One Year Later, David Bradley, deputy director for security with the West Virginia Lottery stated, "We've already had several (incidents) and caught players cheating, caught employees choosing not to do the right thing, and we've gotten them out," according to The State Journal, June 12, 2008.

Should we trust gambling operators who use jargon like "play to extinction" to describe methods designed to make players lose as much as possible, according to M.I.T. professor Natalie Schull in The Washington Post on July 6, 2008?

In a letter dated April 22, 2008, PNGI VP John Finnamore, in response to the horsemen's request for a meeting, wrote, "We are unable to meet with you to discuss anything until the HBPA pledges its support of table games." Is this a use of power that we should trust?

With the approval of more and more gambling in West Virginia, our state and local governments have become addicted to gambling revenue, and the gambling industry has become more powerful. Does the expanding influence of gambling threaten local control of our community?

Can we trust our legislators, as their reliance on gambling revenue increases, to restrict table gambling to racetracks? Rather than make the difficult decision to cut spending, will they follow the lead of the Greenbrier and allow casinos elsewhere throughout the state? The US International Gambling Report concludes, "The history of gambling demonstrates that governments cannot compromise or co-exist with gambling interests or gambling will eventually corrupt the government."

Ultimately, we need to decide if we can trust the promises of an industry long associated with corruption and abuse of power. I have faith that Jefferson County, with its history, beauty, natural resources and proximity to our nation's capital, can do far better.

- Linda Hoffman and her husband have lived in Jefferson County for 23 years. They have raised three children and seven foster children. She recently was the 2009 recipient of the Hovah Underwood Memorial Award for her dedication children in the community. She can be contacted at votetablegames@hotmail.com.

Note: paragraphs in red were submitted by the author, but not printed by The Journal.