

Casino debate tackles issues

Tom Tobin, Staff writer 10:15 p.m. EDT October 28, 2013



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Beneath the vaulted ceiling of an East Avenue church, two antagonists in the debate over casino gambling in New York Monday politely sparred and answered questions from an audience of about 50.

The issue at hand is an constitutional amendment on the Nov. 5 statewide ballot that would lift the decades-long ban on state-sanctioned, privately run casino gambling.

Seated at a table below the altar at the Asbury First United Methodist Church, David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values, represented the "no casinos" side. Veteran labor leader Jim Bertolone, president of the Rochester AFL-CIO, argued the "yes" side.

The two didn't argue much, and in fact agreed more and more as the evening wore on. Blankenhorn, who has become one of the most vocal opponents of the proposed amendment, said, as he often has, that casino gambling is a losing hand when it comes to economic development, good jobs, tourism and social stability. What it does most of all, he said, is take money from the unsuspecting and give to the state.

Bertolone said that, while he has some questions about the economic benefits of casinos in New York, gambling is a "voluntary" act that is already well established in the state, primarily through the Native American casinos. He said casinos attract people and, potentially, glitz.

"Look at Las Vegas," he said. "For a time, it was the fastest growing city in America." Still, Bertolone conceded, the "state wants the money" and it would be better if the jobs created were to rebuild America's sagging infrastructure rather than erect casinos.

Blankenhorn was unstinting in his criticism of Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who has been leading the pro-casino charge. At his urging, the state Legislature has agreed to put the first four casinos in upstate areas.

The Rochester area would be bypassed because of an agreement with the Seneca Nation that gives it control of local gambling. Unless that agreement is changed, the Senecas likely will not build in Monroe County.

"Has Cuomo ever put down his money in a casino?" Blankenhorn said. "Has he ever been photographed inside a casino? The answer is no. He knows it's sleazy. He won't do it himself but he would have you do it."

Blankenhorn admitted that his side is losing as the vote nears.

"The polls aren't looking good," he said. "I believe the people eventually will realize that this is not a good thing. But that realization might not come in time for the vote on Nov. 5."

There were questions, submitted on cards, from many of the attendees.

One asked why casinos are a bad thing if the Turning Stone casino in Central New York employs thousands and makes millions.

Blankenhorn said Turning Stone's success is an outlier, that it not an example to draw on when regarding the question of widespread casino gambling.

The event on Tuesday was co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters of the Rochester Metropolitan Area and the Interfaith Alliance of Rochester.

"We're trying to promote public discussion of this important issue," Mary Pizzente-Morich, president of the Interfaith Alliance, said. The Alliance is opposed to the amendment. "But we're not here to argue our side. We're interested tonight in an honest, open discussion of the issue."

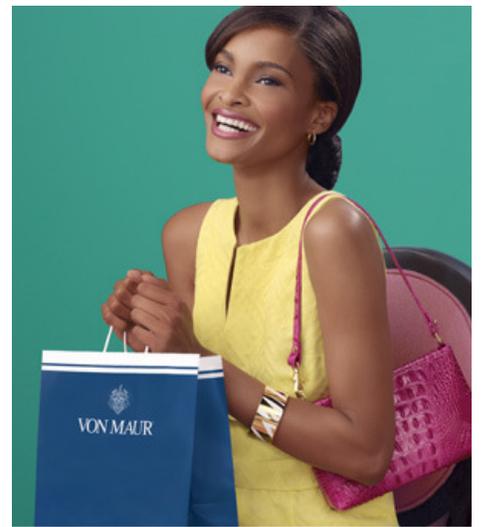
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