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Face Off

Foe Calls Casinos 'crack Cocaine' Of Gambling

The Capital Times :: FRONT :: 1A

Tuesday, January 6, 2004

By Bill Novak The Capital Times

Calling casinos the "crack cocaine" of gambling, the head of a national anti-gambling organization implored a packed meeting room of casino opponents to work as hard as they can the next 43 days to keep a full-blown gambling hall out of Madison.

"Women say it's electric morphine," said the Rev. Tom Grey, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling, referring to what he called the "trance" players can get in when sitting in front of a slot machine. "All they do is see the screen, and everything else turns to black around it."

Grey was the featured speaker at a meeting Monday night of No Dane Casino, a grass-roots group that is gathering momentum leading up to the referendum Feb. 17 on whether the Ho-Chunk Nation's DeJope bingo hall on the city's southeast side should be converted into a casino.

More than 100 people came to the Madison Civic Center on a frigid night to hear Grey and some local civic leaders come together against putting a casino in the city.

Some casino advocates also showed up to make their case.

Ken Whitehorse, a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation and a fifth grade teacher at Schenk Elementary School, said he was disturbed by an "us versus them" attitude in the casino debate.

"We are you; you are us," Whitehorse said. "The Ho-Chunk people have been conducting trade for 10,000 years in North America; that's what we are doing now.

"This is my area. I belong here. The main purpose is prosperity for our people. The Ho-Chunk Nation is not interested in harming anyone."

Grey said it's not a question of having an Indian casino in Madison, but a question of having any casino in Madison.

"Citizens have a right to say they don't want this in their community," he said. "It's the product we're talking about. If it was Donald Trump

wanting a casino, I'd be here. Even if the governor himself wanted a casino, I'd be here."

"It will bring untold social costs to our families and children," said Madison 8th District Ald. Austin King. "I can't stand for this project to go forward."

King also said a casino would have an adverse economic impact on Madison's downtown.

"This downtown has gone through a great revolution in the past few decades," King said. "We have a thriving downtown and that's being threatened by the casino."

Dane County Supervisor John Hendrick said even though the county and the city would get millions of dollars from the Ho-Chunk Nation if the DeJope bingo hall becomes a casino, it's not for the public good.

"This is not the way government should raise money," Hendrick said.

Madison and Dane County stand to share \$91 million in the next 13 years, according to the agreements reached between the two municipalities and the Ho-Chunk, if the referendum passes and a casino replaces the bingo hall.

Madison Attorney Timothy Peyton said he specialized in bankruptcies, but doesn't relish the idea of an increase in business because a casino opened in town.

"People go to a casino, use their credit cards to get a cash advance, then lose the money," Peyton said. "Casinos make money by taking your money. I've seen the damage it has caused to families."

Grey said it was hard to believe the government would be pushing an addictive product.

"The city and county cut a deal," he said. "They became addicted to the revenue, addicted to revenue that destroys businesses and cannibalizes families."

The Rev. Bill White, pastor of Bethel Lutheran Church in Madison, said a casino would have a dramatic effect to the community, based on what he saw after living in Mount Pleasant, Mich., for 15 years. Mount Pleasant is home to the Soaring Eagle casino.

"I haven't met anyone who felt better today than before that casino," White said. "It's really a powerful change to a community. I don't want to see the same thing happen to Madison."

David Relles, a Madison attorney who started No Dane Casino, said the group would hold at least two more public forums before the referendum.

"We know the pro-casino forces will get their story out through TV commercials, paid representatives and public relations, and we can't compete with that," he said. "But our responsibility is to tell the rest of the story, so voters can make a reasonable decision."

Relles said he would welcome setting up a debate with the pro-casino advocates.

Lisa Pugh, spokeswoman for the pro-casino Coalition for the Fair Indian Gaming and Revenue Sharing Agreements, told The Capital Times the coalition had not planned any public informational meetings but wouldn't rule out a debate.

The coalition will rely on advertising and a public relations campaign to get its message to the voters before Feb. 17, she said. A \$140,000 TV ad campaign on Madison's three largest stations will begin Jan. 26, with about 500 commercials to air during the three weeks before the vote.

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