

Slots critics speak out in Plainville

BY JIM HAND SUN CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER | Posted: Monday, September 9, 2013 3:23 pm

PLAINVILLE - Critics of expanded gambling Sunday urged voters to use a town referendum to reject a proposed slot-machine parlor that they said would prey on vulnerable residents without delivering promised economic benefits.

The critics told an anti-gambling forum that Tuesday's referendum on slots at Plainridge Racecourse is a chance for citizens to stop their government from making a tragic mistake.

They said slots will create more problem gamblers, ruin families, decrease property values and make Penn National Gaming money without the town or state getting much in return.

Penn National Gaming of Pennsylvania is the proposed developer of a 1,250-slot facility at the harness track off Route 1.

The firm's proposal and an agreement to pay the town about \$4 million a year in fees and taxes in exchange for permission to operate slots is the subject of a ballot question Tuesday. The election is from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. at the Wood School.

The anti-gambling forum Sunday was the last in a series of hearings on various aspects of the proposal.

Les Bernal, executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling, told the forum of about 15 people that the town's own consultant has said that 5 percent of Plainville residents will become problem gamblers if slot machines come to town.

He said that means government officials have determined that ruining the lives of one in 20 Plainville residents is worth the promise of tax revenue and jobs.

"By bringing in slots, you are saying, '384 of your neighbors, your family members, are expendable,'" he said.

Bernal said research shows slot machines are the most addictive form of gambling and cause some people to visit a slots parlor five or six days a week.

He said local-income residents are particularly vulnerable.

Problem gamblers will be lured by offers of free food and free plays to get them addicted, just as tobacco companies used to give out free cigarettes, he said.

He also told the audience that the benefits promised from casinos and slot parlors are a "phony prosperity."

In Illinois, he said, there are 10,000 people on a list of problem gamblers banned from casinos, but only 7,500 casino jobs. "Gambling creates more addicts than jobs," he said.

Representatives of Penn National, which has an option to buy Plainridge if it gets a state slots license, did not attend the forum, but has said it is one of the leading companies in the industry.

Its executives told a previous forum that the company donates millions to charity, its employees are civic minded, and it will create about 400 jobs at Plainridge while also maintaining live horse racing at the site.

But, Bernal and former U.S. Rep. Robert Steele of Connecticut said states and cities that rely on revenue from gambling are in deep financial trouble.

Bernal noted that Connecticut, with two large casinos, is rated 49th in the nation in fiscal stability, while Rhode Island, with gambling in Newport and at Twin River, is a "financial mess."

Steele said he knows first-hand the negative effects gambling has on a community.

He said he used to live on the border of the Pequot Reservation where Foxwoods Resort Casino is located in Connecticut.

Property values went down and traffic increased while drunk driving arrests increased dramatically when the casino was built, he said.

Steele has written a novel titled "That Curse," which tells a fictional tale of a small New England town seduced by the lure of casino gambling, similar to the experience in Connecticut.

But, he said the consequences of gambling are all too real.

The tax collector in his town was indicted for embezzling \$302,000 to pay for her slot machine addiction, he said.

Revenue to the state from the casinos has also dwindled in recent years because of competition. Now, he said, Connecticut is considering expanding to more forms of gambling because it is addicted to the money.

Penn National needs an affirmative vote in Tuesday's referendum to continue the process of applying for a state license.

It focused its sights on Plainridge only recently after losing a rezoning vote in Tewksbury.

The option it has obtained from the Plainridge owners will only be exercised if it gets the slots license.