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## Column: Chris Fitzsimon says casinos are the wrong way to go

By CHRIS FITZSIMON



Gov. Beverly Perdue headed to Cherokee Tuesday to join officials of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians to officially open live-table gaming at Harrah's Casino and Hotel. The first hand has been dealt.

It's not the biggest story of the week. It doesn't have anything to do with the election or Medicare or a U.S. Senate candidate claiming that women can't get pregnant when they are raped.

In fact, it's almost a nonstory, announced by press releases published in places like the Casino City Times. But there's something about it that is worthy of a discussion and it boils down to a simple question:

Is this the kind of state we want?

Think about it. The governor of North Carolina is celebrating not only the launch of live-table gaming in North Carolina but the latest escalation in the cozy relationship between the state and the predatory gambling industry.

Officials in the Perdue administration negotiated the deal that allowed live dealers at the casino in exchange for the state getting a cut of the profits, a few million dollars a year for education. And it was a plan with bipartisan support. The Republican-led General Assembly approved it.

This is not about the morality of gambling. It is about the state of North Carolina literally partnering with the predatory gambling industry to help fund our schools. And predatory is the right word.

Les Bernal with the national group Stop Predatory Gambling came to Raleigh earlier this year and laid out the disturbing facts at an N.C. Policy Watch Crucial Conversation luncheon.

Casinos make the vast majority of their money off a small percentage of customers, mostly problem gamblers or folks on the way to a serious problem. Bernal described how the most sought-after players were the folks who repeatedly used the ATM machine in the casino to keep getting more cash to keep gambling.

Casinos have a deal with the company that operates the cash machines to sell them the names of the people who make withdrawals, as they are the most likely customers to return. The prospects are then lured back with vouchers or a free hotel room to get them back in front of the live dealers whom Perdue celebrated this week.

Supporters of the casino compact tout the dealer jobs that will be created and the increase in tourism that new live games will bring to that area of the state. It's economic development, they tell us.

Then why only the casino in Cherokee? Why not live gambling in state-sanctioned casinos in Pinehurst or the Outer Banks or Charlotte, maybe right next to the NASCAR Hall of Fame? Think of the jobs we could create and all the money we could raise for our schools by luring problem gamblers into all those places, too.

You might be thinking that it's not a big deal that the state is now a more involved partner with the predatory gambling industry since the state already operates a lottery.

That's true, and that is a problem too, judging by the strong evidence that low-income people play the lottery at higher rates than the general population.

The folks who run the lottery and the people who defend it tell us virtually every day how much money schools are getting from the "education" lottery, but they never talk about where it's coming from. In fact, they don't keep any demographic information at all.

They just keep up with how much they make by convincing people to waste their money on a one-in-a-million chance of striking it rich because politicians of both parties would rather not raise money for education honestly and fairly.

They'd rather prey on the poor and the desperate the same way the casinos do. It's bad enough that Perdue and her legislative partners in predatory gambling approved the Cherokee deal.

Now she's appearing at the casino to celebrate it. This is not the kind of state we want, but it is the one we are getting. And it's disgusting.