

# The Boston Globe

## Q&A

### Inside Man

#### An interview with Stan Rosenberg, the State House's casino expert

January 10, 2010

By Matt Viser

Casinos in Massachusetts? There may be no more electric debate coming to Beacon Hill this year, as legislators take up an issue that polarizes the state and its leaders every time it arises.

Some covet the new jobs and tax dollars that expanded gambling could bring in; others are troubled by the prospect of adding slot machines and blackjack tables to a state already among the highest in per-capita lottery spending.

But there's another aspect as well. If casino gambling is legalized - an idea that looks far more likely now that the state's three top leaders agree on it - it would introduce a whole new industry to the Bay State, attracting international casino developers and demanding a new set of regulations.

Among the lawmakers who will be deciding the issue, no one knows more about this side of gambling than state Senator **Stan Rosenberg**. For the past two years, the Democrat from Amherst has been the Senate's gambling guru, traveling to casinos in Nevada, Louisiana, New Jersey, Connecticut, New York, Iowa, and Canada to study the industry from the inside.

He has spent time with casino developers and money changers, walking windowless rooms full of noisy slot machines in an effort to understand what casinos would mean to Massachusetts - and how the state should handle them.

In all that time, he says, never once has he gambled.

**Rosenberg** spoke to Ideas by phone from his home in Amherst.

IDEAS: How many casinos have you visited?

**ROSENBERG**: Oh, I'm going to say on the order of 10. I've been visiting them to meet with management, get behind the scenes to see how they operate...I usually get a guided tour. I spend time walking through the floors, seeing the different types of gaming venues they have.

IDEAS: Do you have favorites?

**ROSENBERG:** Clearly the Connecticut venues were absolutely amazing. In many of the other states, most of the venues I visited, in my opinion, didn't hold a candle to what they've got in Connecticut, and how they've blended retail and entertainment and gaming. There's nothing like Las Vegas, that's off the charts, but that's in a category by itself. Then there's a bunch of interesting venues in the other states, but they tend to be smaller, less glitzy, less inviting. I like the way the Connecticut casinos have integrated the entertainment and turned them into family venues....Once you pass by the gaming floor, you're now in a whole other world that has nothing to do with gaming....There's waterfalls and all kinds of things. It's a really beautiful venue, and you don't even realize that you're in a casino.

**IDEAS:** Is it ironic to suggest that we should build casinos because they don't feel like casinos?

**ROSENBERG:** They don't see themselves exclusively in the gaming industry anymore. They see themselves in the entertainment industry, with recreational shopping and entertainment venues within.

**IDEAS:** Do you support plans for this kind of casino in Massachusetts?

**ROSENBERG:** If your objective is to maximize economic activity - that means maximize jobs and the chance to bring in out-of-state revenue - then the only way to go is resort-style casinos. All other forms will rely on your own residents and very near traffic. You're just moving your own money around, and you're not creating jobs.

**IDEAS:** Culturally, how would casinos fit here? This is the land of town meetings and church steeples, and casinos are pretty glitzy.

**ROSENBERG:** There may be places in the Commonwealth where you could build things in the style of a Foxwoods or Mohegan Sun that don't look out of place because they're off on their own. If you did a site in Boston, we know where it would likely be - where the tracks are. I've seen some drawings of some facilities that could fit very nicely into a place like that.

**IDEAS:** You've made the point that we've already got gambling here in the form of the lottery. How do you see the difference between lottery and casinos?

**ROSENBERG:** There's nothing classy about playing the lottery. You're buying a ticket. You may scratch it on the counter, in the car, at home....You're just scratching and then you throw it away. You go into these gaming venues and you may see a show, go to a nice restaurant, you may walk around the mall and do your holiday shopping, and you may spend the night.

**IDEAS:** How did you become the Senate's go-to person on casinos?

**ROSENBERG:** About two years ago the Senate president asked me to, in part because she had longstanding relationships with the Wampanoag [the Indian tribe attempting to develop a casino in Middleborough]....She needed to create some distance between herself and the policy issues so there could be no concerns about the objectivity. I voted against slots at the tracks, and I'm not a great fan of gambling or casinos.

IDEAS: Spending time at work by going to casinos sounds like a lot of people's idea of vacation.

**ROSENBERG:** Anybody who knows me knows that I'm up and out between 5:30 and 7:30 in the morning and working until 8 or 10 at night....This is not vacation.

IDEAS: Who pays for your travel?

**ROSENBERG:** When I go to a state to participate in [a] national or regional meeting, I'll extend my stay by a few days so I can do the research on the casinos. There's no state money and no private money. It's either out of my pocket or out of my campaign account.

IDEAS: Do you ever gamble?

**ROSENBERG:** Nope. Never put a coin in a slot machine. Well you don't put coins in them anymore, you play by putting a card into the slot. I buy a lottery ticket every now and then when the jackpot gets really large, just for the fun of it. But no, I'm not a gambler.

IDEAS: Not even a nickel slot machine?

**ROSENBERG:** I don't even play poker with friends. When we play card games there's no money involved. The only game I've played with money is Monopoly.

IDEAS: What should we make of the fact that the Senate's gambling guru doesn't like to gamble?

**ROSENBERG:** I think it's totally appropriate. I'm not wild about gambling, but I don't have this self-righteous attitude about gambling. My concern is that if we're going to do it that it be a very strongly regulated system, that we address community mitigation, economic impacts, and the addiction. I have no doubt there will be more addiction, but I also am not one of those people who believes - I mean 94 percent of people can participate in slot machines without getting themselves in trouble. It's hard for me to justify saying to 94 percent of people you can't do what you want to do when 6 percent of the people can't leave the machine when they've lost more than they should.

IDEAS: How long can you stay in a casino before you need a breath of fresh air?

**ROSENBERG:** I was happy to be able to go in and visit and leave. Because I'm not a gambler, because I'm not even tempted, I don't need to be in there that long. And I like places with windows. I like to know what time of day it is. And that constant hum in the background, which I'm convinced is intentional, drives me crazy.

IDEAS: What are the odds of casinos being approved this year?

**ROSENBERG:** When you have a speaker, a Senate president, and a governor, all of whom are open to expanded gaming in the Commonwealth, that sets the stage for the most serious debate we've had on it. The odds are in favor of it being approved, partly because of the reality that it's happening all around us and people are going to argue that it's time to bring the money home;

partly because we desperately need jobs for low- and medium-skill workers...and we have a huge hole in our budget. The money won't materialize fast enough to close the current hole, but that argument will be used, and it will be compelling to many people.

IDEAS: How quickly would the money materialize?

**ROSENBERG:** Well, there are some things we can do very quickly. Some have argued you should put slot machines at Logan Airport. Those could be up and running in no time. Those could be state-owned, and the money would be all for the state. We could also do slots at the racetracks.

IDEAS: Really? Slot machines at Logan? So you could grab a cup of coffee and sit down to play a few slots while you wait for your plane?

**ROSENBERG:** That's a proposal that's been made. You see it at Las Vegas. I haven't seen it at any other airports, but it's entirely possible you could set up some secure portions of the airports in certain terminals. Maybe it's the international terminal only.

Matt Viser has covered state politics for the past two years for The Boston Globe. He can be reached at [maviser@globe.com](mailto:maviser@globe.com).

(c) The Boston Globe Jan 10, 201