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M. Charles Bakst: Some questions for supporters of a R.I. casino

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The Narragansett Indian casino proposed for West Warwick is center stage at the State House. Tuesday saw a big pro-casino building trades rally, and yesterday the House Finance Committee began hearings.

Jobs! Revenue! And the glitter of a casino itself.

But perhaps you read a Brett Duval Fromson essay in *The Providence Journal* the other day that described a 2 a.m. Foxwoods "smoke-filled hellish landscape of losers unable to tear themselves from the flashing, whirring slot machines."

I hope you saw a *New York Times Magazine* piece about the insidious design and engineering of slot machines. Author Gary Rivlin asked an employee at the manufacturer if he ever played on his own time: " 'Slots are for losers,' he spat."

A 2 a.m. visit to a Reno casino left Rivlin demoralized. There were no "cheery tourists." An older man slumped in his chair. "He stared at the video screen in front of him in a toddler-staring-at-television kind of way. Other players around me were dressed in sweatsuits and slippers, and there was even a woman in curlers. The hairstyles were generally what you would expect if a fire alarm forced people out of bed in the middle of the night. It wasn't pleasure I saw on their faces so much as determination."

These are portraits of gambling emporiums at their worst. But they remind me of things I've seen at more reasonable times of day at Foxwoods, Lincoln Park and Newport Grand.

What about it, Narragansett Chief Sachem Matthew Thomas? You know gambling is bad. "Well, smoking's bad, drinking's bad," Thomas told me Tuesday. And, "I've had women laugh at me and call me a fool for going to a Red Sox and a Patriots game because I stand up and scream like a little kid. They say to me it's immature, it's a man thing, it's stupid, there's a bunch of beer guzzling fools. . . . That's their opinion."

Does he patronize casinos? Rarely. "I'm not a big gambler."

How about you, AFL-CIO big wheel George Nee? Nee has been to casinos but doesn't like slots that much. "I like blackjack. I get to make decisions that most of the time are wrong, but at least I get to make the decisions." (The *Times* story about the growing dominance of slots quoted Frank Fahrenkopf of the American Gaming Association saying, "People would rather just sit there and push a button," and a slot enthusiast explaining the allure by saying, "I don't have to think.")

Nee said, "There are some depressing scenes that you see -- there's no question about that -- but I think it's a question of an entertainment choice for people." And he said the facilities provide good union jobs.

Former Las Vegas Mayor Jan Jones, a top aide at Harrah's Entertainment, the Narragansetts' partner, said yesterday that she's offended by the notion that casinos are filled with "unhappy, depressed, sort of hypnotically drugged people."

Jones said, "Sometime I'll take you to the movies in Las Vegas. I want you to look at the people sitting in there. And, you know, some of them are grossly overweight and a lot of them don't look that happy and some of them aren't as attractive and well dressed as they should be. But should I make assumptions about all moviegoers because some of them aren't what you would expect?"

Jones said she doesn't gamble. "I'd rather spend my money on shoes. And houses." (She has three homes.) So she wants you to gamble, but she's too smart and thinks you're stupid? Jones laughed, "That's like saying I like to go out and buy Manolo Blahnik shoes but you don't. Does that make you stupid or does that mean you just aren't into shoes?"

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