

30 Years MIAMI TODAY

Anti-casino film stars Miami mega-casino drive

Written by [Scott Blake](#) on January 8, 2014

Opponents of casino gambling in Miami have a new weapon in their arsenal: “Pushing Luck” – a short documentary that examines “the question of whether government’s policy of sponsoring casinos has failed,” the film’s producers said Tuesday.

The film, which runs about a half hour, is set to debut in Tallahassee next week. It looks at the high-stakes campaign to bring large Las Vegas-style casinos to Miami and how Florida may learn some hard lessons from Atlantic City and other cities that embraced the gambling industry.

The film was sponsored by NoCasinos.org, an Orlando-based group fighting the expansion of gambling in Florida.

Viewers will notice some familiar faces from the campaign to keep casinos out of Miami: Frank Nero, the former president and CEO of Miami’s economic development agency, the Beacon Council; and local attorney and former state legislator Dan Gelber.

From Miami to Atlantic City, the filmmakers interview former gamblers, former industry insiders, political leaders, and academics to examine the roots of gambling in Florida; the nature of the industry that promotes it; and its social, political and economic consequences.

“This documentary travels through Florida’s complex history with gambling, from railroad tycoon Henry Flagler to the Great Depression to the present,” said Ryan Houck of Consensus Communications, the film’s producers.

“Our crew traveled to Atlantic City, Chicago, Miami and Massachusetts to interview some of the nation’s leading experts on gambling policy, history, social side-effects and economic consequences,” Mr. Houck told Miami Today.

“We spoke with recovering gambling addicts and former casino employees, whose experiences offer a sobering glimpse into the nature of the casino industry. We also talked with folks who’ve had a front-row seat to the broken promises in Atlantic City – and who have watched firsthand as

casino bosses rehashed the very same promises in their attempts to hoodwink the people of Florida.”

Miami has been ground zero in the political fight in recent years to keep so-called “destination resorts” – essentially large resort-style casinos – from opening in Florida. Malaysian-based conglomerate Genting led the charge with a proposal to build a giant casino dubbed Resorts World Miami at the former site of the Miami Herald on Biscayne Bay. However, bills to permit such projects died in the Florida Legislature.

Meanwhile, Genting, which owns multibillion-dollar casino resorts in Malaysia and Singapore, has been busy expanding its empire.

According to reports this week from the Chinese gambling mecca of Macau, an arm of Genting – Treasure Island Entertainment Complex – wants to build a boutique hotel in Macau called Resorts World Macau.

Genting has wanted to break into the booming Macau gaming market, about a one-hour ride from Hong Kong. The Los Angeles Times reported last week that Macau – home to nearly three dozen casinos – registered a whopping \$45 billion in gambling revenue in 2013, a figure that analysts expect will be about seven times as much as casinos on the Las Vegas Strip.

In the US, Genting will spend as much as \$4 billion on completing an unfinished Las Vegas resort it bought last year from Boyd Gaming Corp., Malaysian billionaire Lim Kok Thay, Genting’s chairman, told reporters in Malaysia last month.

Genting bought the 87-acre Vegas site, once home to the Stardust, an iconic casino from the Strip’s early years. Genting said last year that the site will be used for the Echelon project, since rebranded Resorts World Las Vegas, with the opening of phase one set for 2015.

“We’re at the moment at the planning stage,” Lim Kok Thay said last month. “The group is undergoing regulatory investigations by the Nevada Gaming Board, which is one of the strictest you can get. I’m quite confident we’ll obtain this license and only with that we’ll commence the construction.”

In Florida, the premiere of the “Pushing Luck” documentary is scheduled for 6 p.m. Jan. 15 in the IMAX Theater of the Challenger Learning Center in Tallahassee.

Legislators, legislative aides and members of the Tallahassee news media are among those who have been invited. The event also is open to the public at no charge. So far, no other showings have been scheduled.

“We’re hoping to set up showings at universities and schools in Florida,” said NoCasinos spokesman Michael Murphy.

The showing in Tallahassee will be followed by comments by Les Bernal and David Blankenhorn.

Mr. Bernal is national director of Stop Predatory Gambling. He has spoken and written about how government sponsorship of casinos and lotteries fosters social and economic inequalities. His organization is dedicated to national reforms to end government approval and sponsorship of casinos and lotteries.

Mr. Blankenhorn is president of The Institute for American Values, a New York City-based think tank. He also has written about state-sponsored gambling, including a paper titled “New York’s Promise: Why Sponsoring Casinos is a Regressive Policy Unworthy of a Great State.”

In the long term, NoCasinos and other opponents of expanding gambling in Florida are preparing for another fight in the state capital with Genting and other casino companies –and “Pushing Luck” seems to be an early salvo from the anti-gambling ranks.

Genting – Southeast Asia’s largest casino operator – shook up Miami in 2011 when it plunked down \$236 million to buy the Herald site, proceeded to spend many millions more to buy surrounding properties, and announced plans to build one of the world’s largest and most expensive casino resorts on the bay downtown.

Other major casino operators, including Las Vegas Sands, have also looked at Miami but stayed in the background and let Genting take the brunt of the criticism from casino opponents that included Disney, the Florida Chamber of Commerce, and Miami auto magnate Norman Braman.

Eventually, Genting indicated it was willing to downsize its Miami project, but the company has been quiet about its local plans for the past year after its legislative campaign failed in Tallahassee.