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Casinos: A boon or a bad bet?

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Seth Binnix/Messenger Post Media Les Bernal, National Director of Stop Predatory Gambling, gives his anti-casino presentation at The Gould Hotel in Seneca Falls. Bernal was invited by grassroots group Casino Free Tyre, which opposes local developer Wilmorite's plan to build a casino in the Seneca County town of Tyre if it receives a casino license from the state.

SENECA FALLS — A proposed casino in Seneca County poses a very real threat to everything that makes a small community special — or so says national speaker Les Bernal, director of Stop Predatory Gambling.

“It’ll fray the community bonds that make small towns special,” he said. “You no longer care about your neighbors. There isn’t a more predatory business in the country than casinos.”

In opposition of the proposed casino is Casino Free Tyre, a grassroots group made up community members whose primary goal is to shine a light on what they consider the risks and costs a casino brings to a community. The group invited Bernal to speak at a community forum Thursday afternoon before attending the Tyre Town Board meeting later that evening. For the 30 or more residents in attendance, Bernal cited studies that suggested casinos thrive on the backs of those addicted to gambling.

Wilmorite, the company proposing the project and competing with other applicants in the state’s Southern Tier/Finger Lakes region, must submit its complete proposal to the state by the end of June. In that proposal will be a plan to address problem gambling.

James Wilmot, Wilmorite’s chief operating officer, said the plan will exceed state standards. It includes efforts to stopping underage gambling and a self-exclusion list — a list of residents who have voluntarily asked to be denied entrance in any of the state’s casinos — as well as an onsite resource center where problem gamblers can go to learn more about getting help. Employees will also be trained to spot problem gamblers, who generally don’t look like they are having fun, he said. Wilmorite is already working with Seneca County and the New York Council on Problem Gambling while developing the plan.

“This is a serious issue,” Wilmot said. “Some want to just overlook it, we want to combat it.”

Wilmot said he expects that full details of the plan will be released on the state’s website in the near future for anyone to review.

But that plan, as far as Bernal is concerned, is little more than words on paper.

“It’s nothing more than a phony PR narrative,” he said. “They don’t have a business without the crazy, irresponsible gambler.” And casinos breed exactly that kind of gambler, he said.

According to a study Bernal cited of casino business models across the United States, 40 to 60 percent of their profits came from addicts, and only 4 percent of revenue was generated from casual gamblers, he said, arguing that the damage done by casinos far outweighs any promises they make. Citing research demonstrating that only 5 percent of all problem gamblers come forward to seek help, Bernal estimated that casinos have created more addicts than people they employ. In Illinois, the state’s exclusion list has surpassed 10,000 names, Bernal said, while total employees in all of the state’s casinos is only 7,300.