

Finger Lakes Times

QUESTION OF FAIRNESS: Speaker says casino model based on addiction

By JIM MILLER jmiller@fltimes.com | Posted: Friday, May 2, 2014 11:06 am

TYRE — Casino opponents have the evidence on their side, says Les Bernal of Stop Predatory Gambling. They just need to awaken the public conscience.

“The benefit that this community has is, the evidence is overwhelming that this is a failed public policy,” he said. “It’s not a question of if [a local casino would fail], it’s a question of when.”

Bernal spoke Thursday at an 11 a.m. press conference on Chase Road; it was organized by Casino Free Tyre. Behind him, across an open field, was the site where Wilmorite hopes to build a casino.

Bernal attacked casinos on several grounds, saying they base their business model on addiction.

“The slot machine itself, which is the bedrock of casinos, is designed to be addictive,” he said. “Why would we bring in an industry to any community where its product is going to get local citizens addicted to it?”

Bernal also argued that casinos provide no widespread economic benefits to their host communities. Instead, he called government-backed casinos poster children for the creation of unfairness and unequal opportunity.

“This is a government program that is actually extracting wealth from middle-income and low-income families in the name of funding public services,” Bernal said.

Casino Free Tyre reached out to Bernal as part of its effort to block the local project. Bernal also planned to speak at a public meeting at the Gould Hotel Thursday afternoon and at Thursday night’s Tyre Town Board meeting.

Desiree Dawley of Casino Free Tyre said Bernal brings the expertise, studies and research background to back up local concerns about the Wilmorite project.

During his press conference and a subsequent interview, Bernal returned repeatedly to the theme of casinos as failures.

In Atlantic City, N.J., home to casinos for 40 years, the poverty rate stands at 30 percent and unemployment at 18 percent, he said. Meanwhile, the state government is bailing out failing casinos.

“The only winners in this process are the people who own the casinos and a handful of public officials,” Bernal said. “This represents a failure. This represents a failure of leadership.”

Bernal said he became interested in the casino issue when he served as chief of staff for the Massachusetts state senate. As casinos tried to gain a foothold in Massachusetts, he became a passionate opponent.

Now, as executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling, he travels the nation trying to stop casino projects.

“What’s happening in this location is happening all over America,” Bernal said. “It’s being driven by state governments that are desperate for revenue.”

He believes residents will turn down casino projects when given the chance and provided all the information they need to make informed decisions. That has happened many times in Massachusetts and, more recently, in Saratoga Springs.

Casino Free Tyre members hope that will happen locally too.

Dawley and her husband own a parcel of woodland adjacent to the proposed casino site. She said they use part of it as a shooting range and would no longer be able to do that if a casino is built.

“I’m going to have a six-story parking garage as my neighbor,” she said.

About a dozen people attended Bernal’s press conference. Most or all of them own land near the casino site, but Dawley believes the group has support throughout the town.

More than 170 Tyre residents have signed the group’s anti-casino petition, and she said the Mennonite community, whose members do not sign petitions, also opposes the project.

“We have about half the adult population, at least as far as the voters go, signing our petition,” Dawley said.