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How Atlantic City's promise failed its black community

Opinion

by [Will Wright](#) | [August 20, 2014 at 1:28 PM](#)

Atlantic City apparently didn't see it coming.

Thirty-five years ago, when the first of the casinos began to dot the boardwalk, there was a virtual monopoly in casino gaming in the region.

There also appeared to be no voice from the black community surrounding the inception and subsequent failure of the gambling industry in Atlantic City. There was no champion to assure that the benefits of the cash flowing from the casinos would lead to revitalization.

And, more importantly, there was no backup plan looking toward the future to insulate against the inevitable collapse of the city's gaming monopoly.

As a result, you see what is happening today. Thousands of casino workers will soon be joining the ranks of the unemployed in this historically blighted city as four of the city's eleven casinos will be closed in mere weeks.

Author Nelson Johnson, the writer of *Boardwalk Empire*, once referred to Atlantic City, New Jersey, as "[a plantation by the sea](#)." And when you examine the socio-economic history of the city, you can see why.

Since the first casino emerged along the Atlantic City boardwalk, the political line was that the casinos would be a boon to the local community. Critics of the city say over the past three decades no attention was given to making the place a tourist destination for anything other than gambling.

Residents at first believed that if they voted for the casinos, the casino industry would be committed to improving the surrounding community for the benefit of its own survival. As a matter of fact, hundreds of millions of dollars were spent in efforts to bypass the city and take tourist dollars directly to the casinos.

Casinos became all-inclusive silos independent from the surrounding community. Once patrons entered their doors, the casino provided no need to venture out into the community. With that level of exclusion, it was easy for planners to literally ignore revitalization of the black community, saying the casinos were providing jobs. That way of thinking virtually assured that the relatively poor surrounding black community would continue to serve as the under utilized and unappreciated work force to benefit the privileged.

A scholarly paper titled “[Broken Promises: Atlantic City and its African-American Population](#)” written in 1982 documents institutional benign neglect. Writer Christine Salvatore-Smith wrote:

Cora Boggs, housing chairman of the Atlantic City Congress of Community Organizations, a coalition of 30 neighborhood groups said, “On a scale of 1 to 10, what the casinos have done for the people of Atlantic City is minus-1. Nothing has been done. Things are getting worse. People from the outside have come in and gotten the jobs... North of the casino area, the city is a dump... Since casinos, the city has gone down, down, down... You can’t uproot people who have been here for years and years and just say get out, but that is what’s happening.”

Those words were written over 20 years ago when the casinos appeared to be thriving.

In 1996, Gov. Christine Todd Whitman announced a sweeping [roadway and tunnel project](#) for Atlantic City that was to vastly improve its roads and, as her office wrote, “bolster its transformation into one of the foremost gambling destinations in the country.”

Whitman helped commit \$405 million in private and state money to make it easier for gamblers to speed past the surrounding communities directly to the casinos along the boardwalk. The project also called for a new road and tunnel to take travelers to new casinos in the planning stages for the undeveloped Marina district on the western side of the city.

The tunnel project decimated the only middle class black community in the city.

Now it is 2014, and Revel, AC’s newest casino, will shut down on Labor Day. The Showboat will close August 31 and Trump Plaza on September 16.

The Atlantic Club closed its doors back in January.

The shutdowns are part of a rapid contraction of what was until just a few years ago the nation’s second-largest gambling market.. The city has lost thousands of casino jobs as more gambling halls open in the northeastern United States.

According to the *Philadelphia Business Journal*, when the \$2.4-billion Revel casino does close its doors in September, it will leave 3,200 people unemployed. When Trump Plaza closes, 900 people will be out of work. 2000 people will lose their jobs when the Showboat Atlantic City closes.

That’s 6,100 workers looking for new jobs.

There is no assurance that casino workers in AC will find the same work elsewhere. Securing a job will be difficult because other properties in Atlantic City are already at capacity, experts say, so workers will most likely have to look to other states with thriving gaming industries such as Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York and Maryland.

Atlantic City's casino revenue [fell](#) from \$5.2 billion in 2006 to \$2.86 billion last year.

Michael Diamond wrote in the *Asbury Park Press* about the demise of the casino's dominance.

He wrote about the first days of business with gambling halls crowded and exclusive. He interviewed 77-year old Rosemarie Calice, of Toms River, who said: "It was people standing three-feet deep. You had to wear a suit to get in — with a tie."

Thirty-five years later, Atlantic City no longer has a monopoly on gambling in the region. Its visitors are staying closer to home, finding little difference between the games in Atlantic City and the games in Pennsylvania, New York and Maryland.

The current Atlantic City Mayor is 61-year-old Don Guardian who took office in January of this year, the same month the first of the casino closed.

The Republican shocked the establishment by defeating the Democratic incumbent Lorenzo Langford by a 3 percent margin. His approach is to be proactive, having united a coalition of voters with a door-to-door campaign.

Guardian told *theGrio.com* that he is optimistic about the future of the city.

"Job placement and retraining are a priority," he said. "We will be visiting the community to help with job placement and counseling. Every week, we will be scouring the city, being a matchmaker linking people's skills with available jobs."

He sees Atlantic City as a resort industry with gaming as just a part of the revenue stream. Mayor Guardian said new restaurants are to open, a major outdoor retailer is due to open in the city and there are jobs planned as Harrah's and Tropicana expand and negotiations are underway to bring a college campus to Atlantic City.

"We're looking at research and development, high tech companies with the skills training to go along with the new jobs," the mayor told *theGrio*. "This is a new day, a new beginning, a whole lot more than gambling."

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