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Opinion

## How banning gambling can save Atlantic City

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It's time for one last-ditch effort to save Atlantic City. They've tried everything else, so why not this one: Make gambling illegal.

Now is as good a time as any to call it: Atlantic City is dead. The 1970s gambling experiment is a dismal failure that failed to bring lasting economic development.

The Revel, a gigantic, 57-story casino and hotel that is the state's second-tallest building, was meant to revitalize and rebrand the city, but this week it announced it will [close its doors within a month](#), destroying 3,100 jobs after only two money-losing years.

Gov. Chris Christie lavished the project with \$261 million in tax incentives.

That signaled a total reversal of the argument for legalized gambling — instead of an instance of government getting out of the way to allow private businesses to create jobs and tax revenue, it turned into government picking winners and channeling subsidies from taxpayers to multibillion-dollar banks and hedge funds.

As for employment, that \$261 million government gamble represents \$84,000 for each of those mostly menial two-year jobs.

Not that Christie is the one who created the Petri dish of corruption that is New Jersey. A state agency created to require casinos to reinvest their profits in the rest of the community was reconfigured in 1993 — to allow casinos to instead reinvest that money in...casinos.

The next time you get a chance to vote on legalized gambling, remember: The house always wins.

Revel is the fourth casino to close this year in AC, where only nine are left. Revenues are down by almost 50% since just 2006.

“On a recent visit,” reported Fox Business, “both ‘M’s in the brightly lit entrance to Trump Taj Mahal had burned out, leaving a huge welcoming sign that read Tru p Taj ahal.”

Donald Trump is suing to have his name taken off the joint, of which he no longer owns any part.

Legalizing gambling seemed like a strong idea in 1976, when the referendum that created a bettors’ mecca in AC passed.

People are always going to want to bet, and bringing that activity out into the open promised to attract splashy investment with dazzling new resorts and create lots of jobs that would pump up tax revenues.

These things happened. But the jobs were mainly dismal service gigs, the investment was limited to a thin ribbon of development on the boardwalk and the additional tax revenue came at a cost of so much sleaze and unease that other businesses, and their tax revenues, steered clear.

Economic development is a marathon; legalized gambling a can of Mountain Dew.

It may give you a spurt of energy, but it won’t get you to the finish line.

Gambling simply isn’t like other forms of entertainment — it feeds on desperation and addiction, creating pawn shops and trailer parks instead of a middle class.

You don’t see a row of seedy little stores offering to pay cash for jewelry across the street from the multiplex because “Transformers 4” customers don’t get so attached to the frenzy that they have to stay in the theater all day and all night.

Thirty-eight years into the gambling experiment, unemployment in AC is still at 18%. Median household income remains less than half of what it is in New Jersey as a whole.

The poverty rate in the city went from 22.5% in 1970 to 29.3% in 2011.

And the promised tax revenues? In the gambling era, New Jersey went from the fifth-most highly taxed state to second in the nation (behind New York).

Las Vegas managed to diversify beyond casinos, adding quality restaurants and nightlife. AC didn’t, and as competitors sprouted up in Pennsylvania and Connecticut — and even in Queens, where the Aqueduct racetrack casino near JFK Airport opened three years ago — its fortunes continued to sag.

Gambling (like porn) would create less blight if people participated in it privately online, at home, though you could argue that as a small element of a well-rounded economy, it doesn’t cause much harm to its surroundings.

But Atlantic City is Exhibit A for how not to do gambling, as the single attraction that is supposed to bring in suckers from outside.

What's the point of throwing more taxpayer money at a failed experiment?

New Jersey should face the reality that AC has been a colossal loser and that it'll be better off without its temples to addiction. Someday AC could revert to being a charming Jersey Shore destination with low-rise hotels and family fun.

But don't count on it. Most likely, politicians will continue to talk up AC as though it's a libertarian wonderland — while frantically shoveling in more taxpayer subsidies conditioned on decisions being made by government commanders in Trenton.

When it comes to gambling with other people's money, politicians never know when to fold 'em.