

THE Ithaca Voice

Casino should give back embezzled Ithaca bus funds, gambling expert says

By: [Jeff Stein](#) | December 17, 2014

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Ithaca, N.Y. — Think about it this way, says national gambling expert Les Bernal:

If you buy a TV on Craigslist, and then police discover that the TV was stolen, you're not allowed to keep it. Provided it's not held as evidence, the TV must be returned to its proper owner.

The same thing, Bernal says, should apply to stolen money that gets spent at casinos. The casino frequented by Pamela Johnson, 54 — who is expected to plead guilty [to stealing about \\$247,000 from the TCAT bus service because of a gambling addiction](#) — should have to return Johnson's losses to Ithaca taxpayers, Bernal says.

This has happened literally thousands of times across the country over the last several years," says Bernal, national director for Stop Predatory Gambling, which is based in Washington D.C., of stolen funds being gambled away.

"(But) I've never seen a story where the casino returned the money that was stolen."

Bernal contacted The Voice after seeing a story about Johnson on Tuesday.

Johnson plans to plead guilty to stealing close to \$250,000 from the TCAT bus service, a non-profit on which Ithacans are highly dependent, by writing 65 fraudulent checks over four years, according to court documents.

Losing nearly a quarter-million dollars has sorely hurt TCAT, according to Patty Poist, a TCAT spokesperson.

“We’re in need of funding for bus replacements, for our operations, for capital needs,” Poist said.

“So it’s been painful. It’s been very painful for our staff.”

Bernal’s views

The Ithaca Journal has reported that Johnson was gambling at Turning Stone. The Voice has only confirmed that Johnson was gambling at a casino near Oneida County.

Records show that Johnson played the tables, blackjack and three-card poker. She would gamble from Friday to Monday, made friends at the casino and stayed overnight at hotels, according to court records.

Bernal says that the casino must or should have known that Johnson was an addict spending beyond her means and done something to stop her.



Poist, of TCAT, said TCAT had not received any repayment for the stolen money. Turning Stone has not immediately returned a request for comment.

Speaking generally about casinos, Bernal said that they do an effective job of incorrectly blaming the “addicts” when it’s the casinos that exploit the problem.

“The casinos are usually the most powerful political player in the region ... they do a great job of putting the burden on the individual even though they knew this woman was out of control, was spending beyond her means and did nothing to stop her,” he said.

“No one ever puts the spotlight back on who is ultimately the culprit in this — it’s the casino.”

On Wednesday, The New York Times reported that a state board is expected to recommend the approval of Las Vegas-style resorts in New York State as part of a signature Gov. Andrew Cuomo initiative.

Bernal says there’s no question that more casinos like those Cuomo is pushing will lead to more cases like Johnson’s.

“It’s not likely — it’s inevitable. It’s guaranteed,” he says.

“People like Pamela Johnson are the heart and soul of the casinos’ business model.”