

KINGS MOUNTAIN HERALD

Anti-gaming advocate speaks out; Neisler undecided on casino

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By the time Melynda Litchfield hit her early forties, she was at the height of her profession. A longtime registered nurse with a good salary and the respect of her peers, she was working in the intensive care unit of one of Chicago's largest hospitals.

But to hear her tell her story, all that began to change when a riverboat casino was established in the bedroom community of St. Charles she lived in with her attorney husband and three children.

Litchfield, who up until that point considered herself a casual gambler who played the slots or blackjack only when on vacation occasionally, found herself playing the machines more and more at the casino that was "10 minutes down the road." As much as she realized she was becoming addicted to the machines that sat at the stationary Grand Victoria Casino in Elgin, Ill., she was also realizing how powerless she was over her habit.

Over about an eight-year period – beginning around 2000 – Litchfield said she lost about \$60,000.

"I lost an ungodly amount of money playing the slots," Litchfield told about 35 people assembled at 238 Pizzeria on Cherokee Street in downtown Kings Mountain Monday night. "But it's not just the money I can never get back. It's the time with my family – it's the time I could have spent doing other things."

Now, having giving up all kinds of gambling for more than three years, she described slot machines as the crack cocaine of gambling. It was that terrific pull that caused her to empty out a 401(k) savings and a pension. Ultimately, she said, she was fired from her health care job because she was borrowing money from the doctors she worked with.

Litchfield is in town this week to try to drum up resistance to a proposed Catawba Indian Hotel and Gaming Complex that could be build just a few miles south of town. She has since 2014 worked as a National Victims Advocate for Stop Predatory Gambling, a Washington, D.C., based non-profit group that pushes for laws that would make the building of tribal casinos – often called regional casinos -- more difficult.

Litchfield was invited to Cleveland County by the Kings Mountain Awareness Group, a local group that has sought to stop the Catawba casino from coming to town. Following Monday's presentation at the restaurant, she also talked with a women's group of Kings Mountain's First Baptist Church Tuesday morning and spoke before the Cleveland County Board of

Commissioners Tuesday evening.

Last year, the local anti-casino group played host to Stop Predatory Gambling's president, Les Bernal, who spoke at local church to more than 100 people and urged them to write to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and local, state and federal officials to let their voices be heard.

The local advocacy group has also brought in other speakers and anti-gaming advocates from Raleigh and Charlotte to speak on the issue in the last two years.

The county board and all but two members of the Kings Mountain City Council have publicly voiced their support of the proposed casino, although the decision to allow the casino to be built is still pending with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, an agency within the federal government. A petition to place a parcel of land near Dixon School Rd.'s intersection with I-85 in trust – a complicated process that involves numerous agencies working together to overcome both regulatory and environmental hurdles – has been pending since September 2013.

Besides her personal story, Litchfield's message also centered on economics. Groups like the Stop Predatory Gambling believe that regional casinos are hurtful in the long term to the communities they do business in.

It's a message that has been echoed by members of the Kings Mountain Awareness Group, which is led by husband and wife Adam and Cynthia Forcade. They have publicly advocated to put pressure on local, state and federal officials to stop the casino because its business model is one that only succeeds when its "vulnerable, low-income customers" lose. Members of the group have been outspoken at county board and city council meetings for more than 18 months, around the time when the proposed project became public and was beginning to gain steam.

Proponents of the casino have argued that the gaming resort would be a boon for jobs and tourism. The city of Kings Mountain also stands to gain a very large customer should a casino move into town. It would likely sell the resort complex water, sewer services, natural gas and electricity.

At Monday's meeting following Litchfield's presentation, city council member Tommy Hawkins introduced himself to the crowd and supported the sentiments put forth by the guest speaker and the Forcades. Hawkins, an early supporter of the casino, said he came to a change of heart last year after visiting gambling communities – including Las Vegas – and not liking what he saw. He also praised the Forcades for their tireless campaign to raise awareness about the potential negative impacts.

In his comments to the crowd, he endorsed mayoral candidate Scott Neisler, who was seated at a table with Hawkins' during the event.

After a few comments to those assembled at the restaurant, Neisler, for his part, said he remained undecided about his position on the proposed casino.

"At this point I'm just listening to what people have to say," said Neisler, who served two terms

as mayor in the 1990s after sitting on city council for two terms. “I’m doing my research and I’m learning a lot – they certainly make a compelling argument. Really, what I’d like to bring to this and like to see happen is that all voices are heard and respected in this debate.”

City Council member Keith Miller, the council’s other opponent of the casino, was not present due to a conflict, however his wife, Julie, was in attendance, sitting with Hawkins, his wife, Kay, and Neisler.