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Vigil attendees take on casino project

Dave Blanton

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Drizzling rain could not deter a small group of anti-gambling advocates from holding a prayer vigil Saturday night on the steps of Kings Mountain's City Hall.

Under a large banner that read "You pay even if you don't play – predatory gambling is not a revenue policy," area pastors and other community leaders met together in what the nationwide group Stop Predatory Gambling was calling a National Day of Action.

The vigil, which was attended by about 35 people, was a mix of policy talk and scripture as Wesleyan and Baptist pastors from as far away as Boger City and Lenoir attacked casinos for their greed and made a plea to elected officials to stand against regional gambling operations.

"I have seen the casino business model in action," said James Baker, the pastor at Lenoir's First Wesleyan Church. "It gets people hooked on pipe dreams. Casinos are about empty promises."

Baker said that when casinos are poised to move into a community, its operators sell the idea that a casino will drive local tourism, therefore boosting the finances of businesses in the area. But according to Baker, there's a darker side to the formula.

"They want all the tourism dollars for themselves," he said. "They will build more hotel rooms. They will hire celebrity chefs. Kings Mountain will become an afterthought."

As night fell under cloudy skies, those at the vigil also heard from a Kings Mountain business owner who thanked area ministers for lending their voice to the effort to stop a Catawba Indian gaming resort from being built a few miles south of town at the intersection of I-85 and Dixon School Rd.

"As a taxpayer, business owner and property owner, I want to thank those who have come here tonight to speak and voice concerns about a project that obviously will be destructive to this community," said Marie Jackson, who owns Body Junction and has been a vocal opponent of the proposed gaming project since 2013.

The prayer vigil was organized by the Kings Mountain Awareness Group, a local organization that has rallied against the idea of a casino while also taking its message to Kings Mountain City Council meetings and Cleveland County Board of Commissioners meetings. Last year it staged a silent protest on the grounds of City Hall. A contingent of the group also travelled to Washington, D.C., last fall to talk to bureaucrats within the Department of Interior and other federal officials.

Stop Predatory Gambling is a D.C.-based non-profit organization that aims a spotlight on what it says are the ultimately destructive forces of casino gambling. Its National Day of

Action was held over the weekend in about 100 communities in the United States and Australia.

Saturday's vigil drew a handful of elected officials, including Kings Mountain city council At-Large member Keith Miller and Ward 3 council member Tommy Hawkins, both of whom have publicly opposed the casino project. Kings Mountain mayoral candidate Beauford Burton, who has made his anti-casino stance a major element of his campaign, was also in attendance.

Many of the speakers Saturday night scolded supporters of the casino project while calling on those in the community to raise their voices in defiance of what they described as casinos' unethical business model.

"There needs to be a powerful movement that emerges to combat the rise in regional casinos," said Scott Whitney, the pastor at East Gold Street Wesleyan Church in Kings Mountain. "It is a sin to know what you ought to do and not do it."

Proponents of the casino project say the resort would be a boon for local economic development and increase tourism dollars to the area.

Over the summer, the Catawba Indian tribe announced it was in talks with Hard Rock International to brand the casino it would like to see built in Kings Mountain. Hard Rock-themed casinos are already in place in ten locations worldwide, including Orlando, Fla., Las Vegas, Manchester, England, and Punta Cana, Dominican Republic.

Otherwise, there have been no formal announcements about the project, whose fate is in the hands of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.