

Betting on White

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Casinos may never have come to our state if lawmakers hadn't sworn to make them benefit minority workers and businesses.

In 2004, the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus threatened to withdraw its support of the bill legalizing gambling in the state unless they were promised minorities would be involved "at every level" of the industry, according to a May grand jury report on the Gaming Control Board. State Reps. William DeWeese and Mike Veon made that pledge, and the bill passed, with wording that the Gaming Control Board must "promote and ensure diversity" among casino owners, contractors and employees.

But critics — among them a Gaming Control Board commissioner — say this promise has amounted to little more than hot air.

According to data compiled by the board, 82 percent of employees in the state's gaming industry are white. Between 7 and 8 percent of the industry's contractors are minority- or women-owned businesses. Here in Philly, at SugarHouse Casino, 7.8 percent of the contractors were minority- or women-owned businesses in the first quarter of 2011. Out of SugarHouse's 1,008 jobs, 36 percent are held by women and 33 percent by minorities.

At this month's hearing for the renewal of SugarHouse's casino license, Gaming Control Board Commissioner Kenneth Trujillo called these numbers "very disappointing" in a city that is, after all, majority minority and that has more women than men.

Joe Martin, SugarHouse's director of procurement and supplier diversity, responded that boosting these statistics is "pretty much a passion of mine."

Rep. Ronald Waters, chairman of the Black Caucus, says the stats prove that several casinos have failed to make a "good-faith effort" at involving minorities and women, and that to force them to do so, the Gaming Control Board ought to deny or stall their license-renewal requests. But Waters added that the recent grand jury report on the board — which slammed it for, among other things, "scrubbing" its own investigations into casino applicants — "makes you suspect" about whether the agency is capable of holding the industry accountable. Anti-casino activists see the issue in an even darker light: Paul Boni, a board member of Stop Predatory Gambling, says, "They can get as many Asian people as possible inside the casino to lose their money. They haven't made much progress on other diversity issues, but they're good on that one."