

## East Windsor forum focuses on casino costs

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EAST WINDSOR — Opponents of locating a casino in town say it would foster a toxic culture while failing to deliver on its grand economic promises.

Around 100 of them came to a forum Monday night sponsored by the Coalition Against Casino Expansion in Connecticut, a group that includes 14 religious organizations.

The forum, “Costs of a Casino in East Windsor,” was held before a hearty, supportive audience in the auditorium of East Windsor High School.

The Coalition Against Casino Expansion in Connecticut is funded by the United Church of Christ, a Protestant denomination that includes most of the state’s Congregational churches.

First Selectman Robert Maynard and the leaders of the Mohegan and Mashantucket Pequot tribes — which have formed MMCT Venture to develop a casino that is meant to compete with the \$950 million MGM casino being developed in Springfield — last week signed the casino development agreement.

Monday’s headline speaker was former U.S. Rep. Robert H. Steele, who represented the state’s 2nd District in the 1970s before moving to Ledyard prior to the development of Foxwoods Resort Casino in that town and the Mohegan Sun casino in Montville.

Steele has long been a voice against the proliferation of legalized gambling, and authored *The Curse: Big-Time Gambling’s Seduction of a Small New England Town*, a historical novel, after observing the changes in the area after the casinos opened.

“Casinos have created a pervasive gambling culture in Connecticut,” he said. “They’ve skewed the region’s economy heavily toward low-paying service jobs, and they were followed by a steep increase in the number of Connecticut residents seeking treatment for gambling addiction.”

According to Steele, his town’s tax collector was arrested after stealing over \$300,000 in tax receipts “to play the slots at Foxwoods,” and one state-sponsored study showed that

embezzlement arrests in Connecticut increased by 400 percent after the casinos opened in the 1990s.

While proponents of the \$200 million to \$300 million casino have made the case that it will provide a boost to local business and preserve revenue that is crucial to the state, Steele said these claims are myths. The data show casinos “cannibalize” local business’ profits and the state is still in “the worst financial state in its history” despite receiving 25 percent of the existing casinos’ slot revenue, he said.

Steele also contended the casino industry preys on poorer residents and fosters addiction.

“Multiple independent studies now show that 35 to 50 percent of casino gambling revenue comes from pathological and problem gamblers,” he said. “In other words, the casino industry’s very business model is dependent upon preying on people with gambling problems.”

While MMCT has said the deal is meant primarily to preserve Connecticut jobs, Steele rejected that claim.

“At its heart, the tribes’ proposal is actually about bailing out the state’s faltering casino industry,” he said, “and it presents a totally one-sided case that avoids discussing the heavy economic and social costs it would entail.”

The Rev. Denise Terry, senior pastor of East Granby Congregational Church and an East Windsor resident, focused on the development agreement between MMCT and East Windsor. She took particular issue with language in the agreement that states MMCT would make “reasonable efforts” to ensure 4 percent of its workforce — which they said will total about 1,700 employees — lives in East Windsor.

Terry pointed out that this number would total only 68 jobs, and also that the language does not indicate an absolute guarantee.

MMCT also has stated it will give hiring preference to employees who have been laid off from the tribes’ existing facilities, Terry pointed out.

Taking aim at MMCT’s commitment of roughly \$8.5 million in annual tax revenue and impact payments to the town, Terry noted that MMCT expects the majority of that money to come from within 19 miles.

“The casino will drain \$308 million each year from what is essentially the local economy,” Terry said, referencing MMCT’s projected profits. “They will make enough money in the first 10 days of every year to pay the town their 8.5 million dollars.”

Many audience members raised their hands toward the end of the forum to offer similar rebukes of the casino, with one attendee briefly stating he was not opposed to the idea.

The only significant pushback came from East Windsor Selectman Steven Dearborn, who has been a particularly vocal proponent of the casino in a Board of Selectmen that has unanimously backed the idea.

But when Dearborn attempted to speak, Terry told him he has already had public opportunities to make his case, prompting Dearborn to chastise the event's organizers.

"You've done a great job of telling these people what you want them to hear," Dearborn told her. "Let a selectman get up and give them some facts."

He then turned to surrounding attendees throughout the remainder of the public comment portion of the meeting, lamenting that the organizers would not "let me tell the truth."

After the forum's conclusion, Dearborn said the casino would revive East Windsor, which he called "a dead town."

"What they have to understand is the five selectmen decided for this town," he said. "We felt that this was in the best interest of East Windsor to move it forward."

The event's organizers also have been engaged in an petition drive to force a referendum, which is not required by the town charter and which the Board of Selectmen opted not to hold. Dearborn took aim at this effort.

"We have a charter in this town. It's the constitution of East Windsor," he said. "It says what we can do and can't do. This is a private deal — they're buying land from private landowners."

While MMCT initially promised the town it would pay for a referendum should the town choose to hold one, Selectwoman Dale Nelson, who lamented that "pro-casino" voices were not allowed to speak, said she does not believe that offer is still on the table.

A bill approving the development of a casino off tribal land still needs to pass the General Assembly in order for MMCT's plans to move forward. The Coalition Against Casino Expansion in Connecticut has encouraged opponents to either attend or submit written testimony for a public hearing in Hartford on Thursday discussing various state-level proposals pertaining to the development. Last month, Connecticut UCC offered a training session to help casino opponents write testimony for the bill.