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Casinos, Racing Have Sweet Deals

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By THE INTELLIGENCER , The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register

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Times still are tough for quite a few businesses and industries in West Virginia. Owners of some are struggling badly enough that they honestly don't know whether they will be around in a year or two.

Some may wish they owned gambling casinos, thoroughbred horses or racing greyhounds. That way, they could demand the state keep them in business.

All three types of business - if you can call them that - are beneficiaries of enormous gifts bestowed upon them by politicians. Voters never had a say in the matter.

With fewer gamblers going to the casino/racetracks because of competition in other states, it is likely the gambling interests will be going to the Legislature for more help.

Legalized gambling in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland has hurt West Virginia casinos in Chester, Wheeling, Charles Town and, to a lesser extent, Cross Lanes. That has reduced the state's share of their profits. The subject was addressed earlier this month before a gathering of journalists in South Charleston.

Among those participating in a panel discussion on the topic was John Cavacini, president of the West Virginia Racing Association. To continue attracting gamblers, the casino/racetracks will have to keep upgrading their facilities and offering amenities to visitors, he said. One key is up-to-date slot machines, he noted.

Look for the casino operators to seek new subsidies from the state to accomplish that - though they already benefit from a 10-year, \$100 million tax break helping them to acquire new slot machines.

Also, expect the horse- and dog-racing industries to insist that without them, many gamblers would stay away from the casino/racetracks. That is not true.

Entirely aside from the help the state gives the casino/racetracks themselves, it pumps millions of dollars into subsidies for the horse- and dog-racing industries.

Again, voters statewide had no say in this. Though some states hold statewide referendums on casino gambling (Ohio did), that did not occur here. The decisions to allow casinos and to require them to offer dog or horse racing were made solely by state officials, though residents of counties where the tracks are located were given the opportunity for up-or-down votes.

While they were at it, state officials granted the casinos a virtual monopoly, giving them exclusive rights to offer table gambling.

No other business enjoys that government-mandated exclusivity in West Virginia.

No other business exists almost entirely through subsidies such as those paid to the horse- and dog-racing interests.

No other business has the audacity to take the gifts legislators already have handed out - and ask for more.

Had voters been asked about all of this, it is quite likely their answer would have been "no."

Rather than bowing to demands for more help for the gambling and racing industries, legislators should just say "no." A good start would be to end all subsidies for dog and horse racing.

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