

# The Boston Herald

## Jackpot awaits if we play hand Gov's right, let's get in the game

By Jay Ash | Friday, January 25, 2008 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Op-Ed

It is no secret that the state's fiscal situation has cities and towns on edge. That is why I think Gov. Deval Patrick's proposal to use possible resort casino revenues in his budget proposal is a sound idea.

It was the second of my two trips to Foxwoods that convinced me I was really among my element.

**No, not gamblers - although I do play cards in a regular home game, I'm not much of a gambler.**

Instead, I found my element while walking through the shops. There, I met up with the Chelsea Chamber of Commerce, quite literally. The chamber was one of many groups that had made the journey to Foxwoods by bus to enjoy a day of gaming, shopping, dining and entertainment. That's when it hit me that gaming had so marbled its way into our lives that Massachusetts should be competing for our fair share of the \$50 billion gaming industry nationwide.

I didn't always feel that way. Back when one had to travel to Atlantic City or Las Vegas to find a casino, that inconvenience suppressed the influence of gaming on our lives here. Today, though, with as many as 800 commercial and Indian casinos operating in the United States alone, and with gaming outlets now within an hour's drive for many Bay Staters, it's indeed time for the state's economy to retain the billions of dollars and tens of thousands of jobs we collectively export through spending on out-of-state gaming.

Make no mistake; I'm not calling for a casino on every corner, even though we now have its relative, the Lottery, almost everywhere. For those who argue that expanded gaming will produce overwhelming social consequences, I say the nation's most successful lottery - now operating for nearly four decades and generating in excess of \$4 billion in annual sales - has not led to chaos in our neighborhoods. If all of the legal and, yes, illegal gaming outlets existing here in Massachusetts since the Legislature decriminalized bingo in the early 1930s have not led to the ruin of our great society, we

should and can embrace well-conceived and well-run casinos.

Toronto, for example, is like Boston in that both are major cosmopolitan cities on the rise. Casinos and slots are widely available for Torontonians and the many tourists the city attracts, and yet civilization has not ended there nor in the 35 states around this country that have expanded gaming.

Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun are at our border with Connecticut, attracting approximately 7 million annual trips by Massachusetts residents, according to a recent UMass-Dartmouth study. Rhode Island's Twin Rivers and Newport Grand and New Hampshire card rooms attract increasingly more Massachusetts players every year. Maine and New York present similar opportunities. Those neighboring states are siphoning revenues and jobs out of our local economies, and will take even more with expanded or new venues, many of which are targeting tourism dollars as much as more gaming revenues.

In addition, resort casinos, according to reliable data from other states, can create tens of thousands of jobs.

I realize that nearly every public policy initiative carries with it some consequence. Instead of ignoring substantial benefits because of limited consequences, we need to do all that is possible to mitigate the downside while capturing the upside.

Afraid of the impacts of smoking? Then tax it and use the revenues to drive down smoking rates, which we have successfully done here. Concerned about the environment? Then require the auto industry to provide more fuel-efficient vehicles and give incentives for people to buy those cars.

So, let's take a portion of the hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues that state-controlled gaming can produce here, and put that money to work to help make sure that gamers play responsibly.

The smart bet for Massachusetts and its residents is to no longer oppose that which has engulfed and been embraced by our society, but instead to regulate and benefit from it like only state-controlled gaming can do.

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