

Town finds casino is mixed blessing

By Peter Schworm

Globe Staff / December 12, 2011

MONTVILLE, Conn. - On a rainy Tuesday afternoon, cars and buses stream off the highway onto Mohegan Sun Boulevard, a four-lane access road that funnels people to the casino and away from everything else.

For the vast majority of visitors to the mega-casino, the country's second-largest, that stretch of road is the only part of this Eastern Connecticut town they will ever see.

"It's a little city all to itself," said Leah Van Ness, a flower shop owner who likened the casino to the Emerald City in "The Wizard of Oz." "It's right here, but it feels far away."

As communities such as Springfield and Foxborough consider lucrative promises from developers and debate the merits of having a casino in their town, the experience in Montville over the past 15 years offers insight into the potential pros and cons, and a cautionary tale for those who see casinos as economic saviors.

While the Connecticut casino has become a leading employer in the region and pumped tens of millions into its economy, its self-contained design has limited its effect on many local businesses, and town and business leaders warn their Massachusetts counterparts to temper expectations.

"Hopefully, they don't think all these people are going to come through town," said Nancy Gray, president of the Greater Norwich Area Chamber of Commerce. "No, they are going to go down your roads. People aren't going to be shopping in the gift shops. They stay within those walls."

Mohegan Sun's restaurants and shops, while a welcome alternative for locals and a boost to the town's tax base, have also siphoned customers from other retailers, some residents say.

Massachusetts towns face different circumstances than those in Montville when Mohegan Sun was built in 1996. Because Mohegan Sun is a tribal casino, located on sovereign land, it did not require local approval, as new casinos in Massachusetts will. That meant that Montville had little leverage to extract financial concessions from the Mohegan tribe.

Under the Massachusetts law, casinos must win local approval, giving cities and towns more latitude to negotiate for concessions, such as yearly subsidies. In Connecticut, Mohegan Sun pays 25 percent of its slot revenue to the state, which redistributes some of the money to the towns. Under its agreement with the town, it pays \$500,000 a year, far less than Massachusetts towns will be likely to settle for.

Casinos are trumpeting their economic benefits in hopes of building support. Mohegan Sun, which is looking to build a private casino just off the Massachusetts Turnpike in Palmer, said its Montville casino has created more than 10,000 jobs and spurred the construction of hotels and shopping centers.

But many in Montville urged caution.

"The casino attracts business to the casino," said Laura Brimlow, who runs a consignment shop, echoing a widely held sentiment in town. "Outside the casino, not so much."

On a bleak stretch of Route 32 near Montville Town Hall, signs of prosperity are scant. A sandwich and coffee shop is boarded up, and two shops beside it sit vacant. Few residents blame the casino.

But few give it much credit, either.

“Their visitors don’t spend as much in town as we would have liked,” said Ronald McDaniel, mayor in the middle-class town of 20,000. “They really are a destination.”

Still, McDaniel and other city officials said the casino, while in some ways a disappointment, has provided an unmistakable boost. It has employed thousands of residents, offsetting losses in manufacturing and light industrial companies that were the cornerstone of the region’s economy.

“They picked up a lot of jobs that were lost,” McDaniel said.

Mohegan Sun has more than 8,000 employees, making it one of the largest employers in the state, the tribe says.

Tony Sheridan, president of the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut, said the casinos are a major economic catalyst.

“The ripple effect is enormous,” he said. “They do a tremendous amount of purchasing throughout Connecticut.”

In 2007, a study by Spectrum Gaming Group concluded that the casino provided substantial economic benefits, generating 16,000 jobs and more than \$585 million in personal income.

Much of that comes from jobs indirectly created by the casino, and town officials noted that some businesses, such as hotels, service stations, and fast-food restaurants, have thrived in recent years.

“That’s directly linked to the casino,” said Candy Buebendorf, chairwoman of the Town Council.

The financial boost, however, has come at a cost. Traffic has gotten worse, particularly in the evening, and drunken-driving arrests have surged. In Norwich, which is within 8 miles of Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods, such arrests doubled after 1992, a 2009 study found.

Some residents complain that the proximity of the casinos has created a secret plague of problem gambling, usually involving those who have the least to lose.

“People who can’t afford it but just keep going,” said Brimlow, who runs the consignment shop.

The casino has also drawn an influx of immigrants, primarily Chinese, and their children often enter school speaking little English. The people have moved here from other cities, often New York, to work at the casinos, residents say. That has forced the schools to bring in more bilingual teachers.

“It’s been a cost to the schools,” Buebendorf said. “Our English Language Learner program has really had to be beefed up.”

The number of Chinese-speaking students in the public schools rose from 54 in 1994 to 183 in 2007, the study found.

Otherwise, most residents say the casino has a surprisingly small impact on the life of the town. Gamblers pour in and out, but barely leave a trace.

“They aren’t dropping dollars in Montville,” said Lynne Gaffney. “It’s like a bubble.”

A sizable minority of residents say they are morally opposed to the casino, believing gambling is wrong. But most residents say they enjoy an occasional visit to the casino, and add that the concerts, basketball games, and restaurants that are part of the complex provide alternatives for nonbettors.

That creates jobs, and even critics of the casinos say they are badly needed in a region going through long-term shifts.

In the past 15 years, the two casinos accounted for most of the employment growth in the state.

“If we didn’t have the casinos, where would we be?” Gray asked. “In the long run, people understand that.”

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