

Op-Ed/Editorials - No More Floating Poker Games in Mississippi

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Some of the hardest hit victims of Hurricane Katrina were Gulfport and Biloxi's casino barges. The real tragedy is that most of the damage could have been avoided with a little common sense.

Nothing could stop the high winds. But the storm also sent a roaring wall of water 30 feet high from the Gulf of Mexico smashing into the Mississippi coast.

The floating part of Grand Casino Biloxi was torn off its moorings and carried half a mile, crashing onto U.S. Highway 90. Casino Magic was pushed even further inland.

The saddest story was the Hard Rock Casino, scheduled to open in two weeks. The giant guitar sign of the \$235 million project seemed to be unscathed, but the rest of the building will be torn down before it is ever used.

The largest Gulf casinos were constructed on barges, rammed into the shore. Others were on ships, permanently docked and incapable of moving under their own power. Mississippi law requires casinos to float. Here, they floated on the ocean. But that ocean temporarily raised up and swept a half-mile inland.

Why did Mississippi's lawmakers require that casino gaming could only be conducted on water, even when the casino is connected to buildings built on solid land?

They had to know what would happen, as they had been through hurricanes before.

Although there have been legal card clubs and poker rooms in other states, Nevada had a monopoly on casinos until Atlantic City opened 30 years ago. The history of gaming since then has been one of laws and regulations that are nearly unfathomable.

The problem arises from gambling's spotty history. Throughout history, societies have usually made casinos completely illegal. When exceptions were carved out, governments quickly found they had to regulate to keep out the bad guys.

Gaming is a morally suspect industry. Until recently, a politician risked not being reelected if he voted for casinos.

State legislators are not social scientists, but they sometimes think they are. Legalizing gambling gave lawmakers the opportunity to try social experiments. With no research or studies whatsoever, legislatures imposed restrictions that they supposed would protect problem gamblers from themselves.

Iowa was the first to launch riverboat casinos. The law was sold as merely a means to enhance the state's tourist industry. Proponents floated images of Mark Twain, steamboat cruising on the mighty Mississippi. (Riverboat gambling before the Civil War was actually illegal and crooked, but nobody wanted true historic accuracy.)

Boats were required to cruise for four hours. Bet limits were set at \$5 max to make the industry unattractive to Nevada operators and protect players from losing too much. No one asked what a gambler was supposed to do if he lost his original stake in the first half hour and was locked in a casino with nothing to do but gamble some more.

Other states, including Mississippi, followed.

But the original idea quickly fell apart. Riverboats can't cruise during storms, but casinos could remain open. To keep the spirit of the law, regulators allowed "phantom cruises," locking the doors even though the boat remained docked.

But some patrons had emergencies and had to leave early. Once the doors were opened to let people out, it made little sense to not let more players in. The requirement of cruises disappeared completely. And eventually, so did the boats themselves. Missouri allowed boats in moats, with river water piped in. Mississippi allowed deep pilings to lessen the recurring danger of hurricanes.

What will happen now? Mississippi desperately needs its Gulf Coast casinos to reopen. But it does not need to repeat its mistakes of the recent past.

Perhaps it is time for the state's lawmakers to acknowledge that legal gaming has become an established, respectable business, that should not be treated like something evil that has to be surrounded by holy water.

What do you think? Comments on this article can be addressed to Prof. I. Nelson Rose.

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