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Should we push our luck?

Chicago area already ranks No. 3 in gambling -- with more casinos proposed

June 12, 2007

BY CHRIS FUSCO AND WHITNEY WOODWARD Staff Reporters

Slot machines and blackjack tables apparently have become a Chicago area tradition just like pizza, skyscrapers and the blues:

For the fifth straight year, casinos in the Chicago market rank No. 3 in the United States behind Las Vegas and Atlantic City in terms of gambling revenues.

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For the fifth straight year, casinos in the Chicago market rank No. 3 in the United States behind Las Vegas and Atlantic City in terms of gambling revenues.

(Jean Lachat/Sun-Times file)

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TOP U.S. CASINO MARKETS

1. Las Vegas Strip: \$6.689 billion
2. Atlantic City, N.J.: \$5.208 billion
3. Chicago area, Ind./Ill.: \$2.595 billion
4. Connecticut: \$1.734 billion
5. Detroit, Mich.: \$1.303 billion
6. Tunica-Lula, Miss.: \$1.252 billion
7. St. Louis, Mo./Ill.: \$990.98

Four casinos in Elgin, Aurora and Joliet joined five in northwest Indiana in raking in nearly \$2.6 billion last year, according to an analysis by the Innovation Group, a hospitality consulting firm. That sum paled next to the \$6.6-billion plus collected on the Las Vegas Strip, but it blew away the likes of Reno, Detroit and New Orleans.

The Chicago area's most recent appearance near the top of the annual list comes at a critical time: Illinois lawmakers are considering creating four new casino licenses -- including one within Chicago itself -- and expanding the size of existing casinos.

Additionally, a long-defunct casino license once slated to go to northwest suburban Rosemont could be sold within the next year or two, potentially bringing the number of new Chicagoland casinos to five.

Some lawmakers in Springfield see new casinos as a fix to the state's cash crunch because they'd generate hundreds of millions of dollars in new gambling taxes.

But if Chicagoland already is No. 3 in the national casino marketplace, how much more gambling can the region handle?

Moreover, would the potential social costs -- including gambling addiction and crime -- outweigh the benefits?

State Rep. Brent Hassert (R-Romeoville), the ranking Republican

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million
 8. Reno-Sparks, Nev.: \$939.50 million
 9. Boulder Strip, Nev.: \$929.70 million
 10. Shreveport, La.: \$847.18 million

in the House Gaming Committee, urged lawmakers to "proceed with more caution" and not create a handful of casinos in the Chicago area.

"I think that it can become very quickly a liability," Hassert said.

"Competition's usually not a bad thing, but when you're talking about something as unique as gambling, you have a saturation point, you do have a certain limit. . . . And socially, we have to draw a line at what's acceptable and what's not acceptable."

Gambling expansion proposals traditionally have crumbled under their own weight in Springfield, and the four-casino bill that recently cleared the Senate could do just that. The House has yet to consider it.

What would Indiana do?

The Illinois Casino Gaming Association, which represents existing Illinois casinos, prefers a scaled-back proposal, said Tom Swoik, the group's executive director. "When you're adding that much, we're worried about saturation," he said.

And that doesn't even begin to address concerns about how Indiana lawmakers might respond to a barrage of new casinos in Illinois.

Indiana already has larger casinos than those in Illinois -- a function of Illinois capping the size of its casinos to 1,200 "gaming positions" each. Still, the Indiana casinos in the Chicago market took in about the same amount, about \$1.3 million, as their counterparts in Illinois last year, according to the Innovation Group.

State Rep. Lou Lang (D-Skokie), a longtime advocate for more gambling opportunities in Illinois, wasn't surprised to hear the Chicagoland gambling market ranks No. 3 in the country.

"There's nothing inherently evil by that," he said. "And all I think it does is prove my point that we have an opportunity -- without doing anything that isn't already legal under the law -- to create economic development and expansion for our revenue base in the state of Illinois and put a lot of people to work."

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