

## **Guest Columnist: Casinos bring new take on old business idea**

**By Jonathan Drapkin**

Gaming is an issue of critical importance for our region. Some of us have listened to the casino debate for decades. During that time, some things have changed and some have not.

New York State is now surrounded by more states that have gaming and are siphoning off revenues, while the State itself has created many forms of Lotto-style gaming. We cannot logically argue that gaming would be prevented by turning down the referendum, it is already here.

What hasn't changed is the economic condition of those communities most likely to host a casino -- Ellenville, Monticello and Liberty. Unemployment rates in Ulster and Sullivan stand at near 8%, the highest in the region. The villages themselves suffer much higher rates of unemployment and are home to entire blocks of vacant storefronts.

Gambling is not for everyone, but a "no" vote will not in any way prevent gambling from happening. Voting for casinos may allow progress on a number of fronts which will actually benefit the region.

### **Revenues, Jobs, and a Fresh Take**

Legalized casinos mean new revenues for a state that badly needs it. Casinos will pay upfront gaming license fees and they will be taxed heavily annually. For instance, taxes on slot machines will equal the current range on video gaming, 37-45%. Beyond that, New York State stands to capture dollars that are now going to Atlantic City, the Poconos, Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun.

Job creation is expected to be robust and regional. At the proposed Nevele and Concord developments, estimates call for 1,200 construction jobs each. Creation of long-term employment is pegged at 1,000-plus full-time equivalents for each facility. Additional job creation will occur off-site.

Add to revenue and jobs a less tangible, but regionally relevant side-effect and that is branding. Legalized gaming would give people one more reason to visit the Hudson Valley and Catskills. As much as hiking, biking, fishing and concerts are forms of recreation, so is gambling. Casinos in our region represent a recasting of an old idea: It's fun to come here, an idea central to every tourism-related business here, big or small.

## **Negatives Become Positives**

There was a time when the discussion of casinos conjured images of traffic jams and negative environmental impacts. Given the proliferation of gambling facilities around us, traffic projections have to be lower and by building on sites of the old hotels, the environmental impact is significantly reduced. Adaptive reuse at these facilities is textbook redevelopment -- recycling, if you will.

We now know that the demographics of the Hudson Valley are changing and that we must adjust to meet the change. Creating jobs that might pay a little bit more or add a few more kids to the school systems is now critical. With smart oversight, the model for casinos in New York state will more closely mimic the stand-alone resorts which have found success in Connecticut. It is a safe bet to say the casinos built here will not resemble Atlantic City or Vegas.

If we keep in mind all of that and truly acknowledge what has changed and what has not, it's not that hard to say "yes." In fact, it is necessary.

*-- Jonathan Drapkin is the president and CEO of Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress, a nonprofit research, policy and planning group that seeks regional solutions to increase the vitality of the region. He can be reached at [jdrapkin@pfprogress.org](mailto:jdrapkin@pfprogress.org)*