

Missourians need to send a message to casinos

By STEVE TAYLOR

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According to recent campaign contribution disclosures, Missourians for Fairness and Jobs has spent more than \$5 million in an attempt to rescue illegal casinos that are in cement tubs up to 1,000 feet from the river.

Almost 90 percent of the casino war chest comes from corporations in Las Vegas, Memphis and Atlantic City. If not for its grave implications for all Missourians, Amendment 9 could almost seem comical.

Although gambling interests are now making an appeal for fairness, they, their lobbyists and the Missouri Gaming Commission have made a mockery of what voters approved.

Last November, the Missouri Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the commission had violated the law by licensing boats in moats. The Supreme Court decision did not change the law but reined in regulators who were acting outside of the law on behalf of special interests.

When gambling was proposed for Missouri, a deal was made with voters. Gambling would not be on land, but on nostalgic paddle wheelers that cruise the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. Casinos spent more than \$12 million promoting riverboats, but in the

long run, the terms of the agreement conflicted with their strategies for expansion.

According to Nancy Todd, president of a consulting firm specializing in promotion of gambling expansion, a recognized political tactic to gain public approval is to understate the extent of gambling likely to occur after legislation.

By introducing limited and tightly regulated gambling ventures, operators gain a foothold and move on to larger, land-based operations.

Wrote Todd in *Campaigns and Elections* (1994): "A good rule of thumb is to look at it as a ladder. Areas that have no gambling at all warm up to the 'cruises to nowhere' as the first rung on the ladder. The next step would be dockside. At the top would be land-based casinos."

At the heart of the issue is whether Missourians will demand regulation of gambling or hand the reins over to Las Vegas interests and their Gaming Commission.

Since riverboat gambling has been approved, both the industry and the commission have lobbied to eliminate every safeguard promised to voters. Experience has shown that safeguards are needed to protect communities.

Studies linking the spread of legalized gambling with increased rates of bankruptcy, suicides and addiction disorders under-

score the need for strict regulation. A recent report by the United States Gambling Research Institute estimated that compulsive gambling-related social costs, such as bankruptcy, embezzlement and theft, may actually produce a net loss in Missouri of \$185 million annually.

Now that they've been caught in their own bait and switch, the casino power brokers have no problem attempting to blackmail Missourians with threats of the loss of jobs and tax revenues. Currently, casino revenues represent less than 4 percent of Missouri's education budget. Many school districts receive no additional revenue from gambling.

Casinos are again asking us to trust them. Yet at the same time they have lobbied to eliminate the voter-approved loss limit and to lower their tax rate. When Missourians voted for riverboats, they voted for limited and tightly regulated gambling. The Supreme Court has honored that, but it is the voters' responsibility to preserve the integrity of their laws and limit the influence of this predatory industry.

On Nov. 3, we must draw the line on Amendment 9 or encourage further violation of our laws by Las Vegas gambling interests.

Taylor is the spokesman for Show Me the River Inc. in Ballwin, Mo.