

Remarks for Mayor Bob Short, Gulfport, Mississippi - September 10, 1998

Welcome the Mississippi Gulf Coast. It is indeed an honor and pleasure to address you today regarding the impact of the gaming industry along the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

I would like to take of you back six years ago to 1992 - prior to casino gaming. The Coast's economy was on the verge of being in shambles. Businesses were closing their doors, others kept their doors open just to see if dockside gaming would be approved. The unemployment rate was more than 7%, few employees had benefit packages for health, life and disability insurance or retirement plans.

Now lets look at 1998. The economy is the strongest it has ever been. New businesses open weekly. In Gulfport alone, more than 200 business building permits are issued monthly and more than 200 residential building permits per month as well. We have seen the first new apartment construction in nearly 10 years. More people are employed than ever before and the unemployment rate is around 4% - literally, *anyone who wants to work can*. And, perhaps what is most important, employees are earning higher wages than ever before, and most employees now have employment benefits packages. The City of Gulfport's sales tax revenues have more than doubled, to more than \$1 million per month.

I also don't want to pass up the opportunity to correct some false information that has been passed around this country concerning crime since gaming. Crime statistics for our area have been taken out of context and exploited. At the same time as the legalization of gaming, Gulfport completed a major annexation that doubled our City's land size and between the annexation and improved economy, our population has nearly doubled. We also have millions more visitors per year than we did in 1992. All of our crime statistics indicate that our increase in total crime numbers coincide with the rate of our growth. There are no hard facts to link any increases in crime directly to gaming. We are in fact, facing the same kinds of crime problems as Orlando, Florida - home of Disneyworld. This is still one of the safest communities of its size in America.

And finally, I would like to address problem gamblers. It is obvious that there are people suffering from gambling addictions, just as there are people suffering addictions to alcohol, tobacco, food and the computer internet. However, what is seldom touted is the fact that the gaming industry has taken the lead in promoting and paying for research and treatment of problem gambling. Casinos do not make their profits off gambling addicts. It is incumbent on local communities and churches to provide assistance to those suffering. And, those with addictions must take some responsibility for themselves and seek help. We have not banned credit cards because some people have no control over their spending habits.

In closing, I thank you for the opportunity to address each of you today. The gaming industry has reshaped the future of our cities and counties throughout the State of Mississippi. Many of our residents wake up each morning knowing that our city and state now offer career and social opportunities far beyond what they had ever imagined.