

SWEET HOME, CHICAGO

Msg. John J. Egan National Gambling Impact Study Commission May 20, 1998

I've been concerned about gambling's impact for thirty years. But since Tom Grey's unbelievably generous offer to let me tell you about Chicago, I've been thinking about gamblers themselves, too.

I've read how gambler demographics break out.

The glittering few occupy the top sliver. You know the type.

James Bond in perfect dinner clothes. Icy martini in hand. Elegant lady at his side. Totally controlled and perceptibly detached, even from the towers of chips growing in front of him.

It's tempting to think we'd be exactly like him ... if virtually every fact of our lives were different.

We know the opposite end of gambling's demographics, too. Terrorized. Exhausted. Chasing their losses. Aging painfully. Converting plastic into more cash at the ATM. Leaving babies to bake in closed-up cars. Dropping Social Security checks into slots ... quarter by quarter. Betting the rent ... or any money they can score in any way ... that the next wager will get them back up to zero. And mouthing the prayer that diagnoses an addict: "God, get me out of this one ... and I'll never do it again."

In the middle is the enormous 'turnover' market ... first-time or sometime gamblers ... who drop into fantasy-land to play for a few days ... then leave for the comforting reality of home.

Gambling towns break down the same way.

The glittering top is Las Vegas. Dazzling. Detached. In control. Some call it a town with single-industry focus. Others call it a one-trick pony. Beneath its relentless welcome lies a hard-nosed network of security. Down-to-the-penny forecasting. Meticulous systems to camouflage the mob. Murders. Prostitution. Robberies. Rapes. Suicides. And all the crimes that always accompany gambling ... and might stand in the way of the single municipal mission: To separate visitors from their cash.

On the other end are moribund spots like Atlantic City, Gary, and now Detroit. Or aging, ailing rivertowns with little left to lose. Or dirt-road, dirt-floor, dirt-poor pockets of hopelessness like our Indian reservations. Of course their city fathers gamble on a go-for-broke shot at survival when the prophets of profits dangle cash. Promises of tourists. Economic revival. And jobs-jobs-jobs.

Chicago almost was one of them a few years back. Our economy was awful. Job-market, worse. Public education, deteriorating. Crime, escalating. The Loop was becoming uninhabitable. Gangs were bringing crime into bungalow neighborhoods. We were losing self-confidence. And hope.

When the magi from the desert promised civic renaissance ... 'family entertainment' ... jobs ... tourists ... and cash, our city fathers were set to sign up ... until the Chicago River sprung a leak and flooded the Loop, tabling the project. I like to think it was Providential.

Since then, two things happened.

One. All our fears proved out in reality for towns that took the bait. We said gambling never changes its stripes. And we were right.

Two. Chicago revived, without surrendering its character, identity, and integrity to gambling. Our economy came back to life. Jobs are plentiful. Tourists are having a grand time with us. Chicago is looking and working like the world-class city we are.

Chicago is the market in the middle.

It's a city of neighborhoods ... neither single-minded nor desperate enough to risk home and family by laying a dicey bet on a dream. We're not cool like James Bond. We're not single-minded like Las Vegas. And we're nowhere near as frantic as the rivertowns and Indian reservations.

And that's precisely my point. Although travel agents now call us a "destination city," Chicago, first and foremost, is a real home town. While you're here, I hope you will have time to notice.

Not only our breathtaking lake front and skyline. Also our extraordinary shopping and dining. Our spot at the heart of the nation's transportation and financial networks. Our parks and forest preserves. Our newly renovated and reclaimed Loop.

Not only the Bulls. And now, God help us, maybe even the Cubs.

Also our crime rate dropping. Our public schools improving. Our employment rates at an all-time high. Our new construction. Renovation. Our clean and healthy new face.

Our vibrant beauty. Our energy. Our new riverwalks and Navy Pier. The way Chicagoans use and enjoy their hometown.

There's still an appetite for gambling among some Chicagoans. In fact, our civic leaders still envy the streams of cars that head out - north, south, east, and west - to gamble in other people's casinos nearby ... and to leave their tax-revenues in someone else's coffers.

I'd remind our leadership that when the gambling day is done, Chicago can come back to the comforting reality and diversity of home.

I'd remind them that casino gambling - whether land-based or riverboat - changes a community's character forever. It's a bell that never can be unrung.

I'd remind them that Chicago didn't trade its soul for a last-gasp, crap-shot at a dream. Chicago still watches from a distance as legalized gambling cannibalizes its own, from coast-to-coast.

And I'd remind them that Chicago's still Chicago - only better.

I hope you feel how welcome you are in Chicago. Enjoy our hometown. Explore it. Chicago is a great town. Chicago is for-real.