

Written by Administrator  
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Gov. Rick Scott has attempted to keep a poker face on whether he supports allowing Las Vegas-style casino resorts in Florida. But he and legislators should put their cards on the table and engage the public in a debate on the issue. It's a bet worth placing. One of the winners could be Bay County. Barely a week into office, Scott had to backtrack on a comment he made in which he appeared open to allowing Vegas-style casinos. That contradicted his campaign pledge not to expand gambling.

"I don't want the state to become largely dependent for revenues," Scott said at a Jan. 7 news conference. "And, I haven't taken a position on doing anything different with gaming."

But he did acknowledge that shortly after his election, he met in Las Vegas with gambling executives, detouring his private jet en route to the Republican Governors Association meeting in San Diego.

Stop pussyfooting around. It's not like Florida is pure as virgin snow when it comes to gambling.

The state already allows a lottery, bingo, poker, slot machines and electronic blackjack, as well as wagering on horse racing, dog racing and jai-alai. Last year, the Legislature passed, and then-Gov. Charlie Crist signed, a deal with the Seminole tribe that guarantees them the right to table games such as blackjack in exchange for at least \$1 billion in payments to the state over five years. The compact also grants the Seminoles the exclusive right to Vegas-style slot machines outside of South Florida.

As Sen. Ellyn Bogdanoff, R-Fort Lauderdale, a former opponent of gambling, admitted to the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, "It's not expansion. It's here. We're already the fourth-largest gambling state in the nation."

Vegas casino lobbyists have been trekking to Tallahassee to give their sales pitch. They want to invest in Florida. That means constructing new facilities (jobs), hiring employees (more jobs) and generating revenues to the state through taxes and gaming fees. That would be cool water to a parched economy.

South Florida has been pushing hardest to add Vegas glitz to its neon coast, but Bay County also is well-positioned to attract casinos. It already has a tourism infrastructure that could use a

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shot of diversification. Perhaps most importantly, it has a new airport with more connections nationwide to accommodate people who might like to combine the Vegas experience with The World's Most Beautiful Beaches.

State Sen. Dennis Jones, R-Seminole, chairman of the committee that oversees gambling, notes that according to a recent news report, 3.5 million people left this state to gamble elsewhere. He is drafting a bill that would allow four or five casino resorts in Florida.

But why micromanage it like that? That's what the state has been doing for years, parceling out gaming privileges based on who has the best lobbyists. That creates inequities. The Seminole compact is a perfect example. Why should the tribe have a monopoly on certain games? Once officials get past the moral objections to gambling there is no good justification for saying yes to poker here but not there, yes to blackjack there but here, etc.

The state's interest should be in maintaining the integrity of the games to protect consumers from fraud, and in collecting revenues from taxes and fees.

Otherwise, make all forms of gambling legal and allow local communities to decide if they want to participate, much the way the state condones alcohol consumption but municipalities and counties are free to go "dry" if they so choose.

If Tallahassee gives the green light to Vegas casinos, Bay Countians could vote on whether to allow them to set up shop here — with the full knowledge that if they say no, they might find the gaming resorts just down the road in neighboring counties.

Gov. Scott is right — Florida shouldn't become dependent on gambling to balance its budget. But then, it shouldn't be dependent on *any* single source of revenue. The collapse of the housing market and the slump in tourism have been major drags on the state's economy. That's why it should be considering other ways to stimulate economic growth. Casino gambling should be on the table.

## EDITORIAL: Ante up on casinos - The News Herald

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