Written by Administrator
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Normally I don't like to quibble with letters to the editor. That's where readers get their say, and I'm all for it.

But on the other hand, I hate to see the spread of bad information -- especially on matters of public policy. Good decisions rest on good data.

So I cringed to read a letter last week that just didn't have the ring of truth. I did a little research and now let me set the record straight: Vicksburg has not turned into a zombie wasteland.

In the letter, a Lavon resident wrote: "Vicksburg, Miss., used to be one of my favorite small cities in America; tons of Southern charm. It all changed when riverboat casinos came to town.

"Last time I stopped there, the casinos had been there just less than a year, but I knew something wasn't quite right; lots of cold stares, if anyone looked at me at all."

He went on to say that in a causal chat, a local utility worker told him service disconnections and crime "had gone through the roof" in Vicksburg.

Well, it's hard to quantify "cold stares." The writer makes a visit to Vicksburg sound like an episode of *The Walking Dead*. But crime and utility disconnects are easy to count. And officials in Vicksburg tell me neither went up when casinos opened there almost 20 years ago now.

Nicole Bradshaw is a spokeswoman for the electric utility Entergy. She said company analysts examined service disconnections and late payments after the arrival of casinos in both Vicksburg and Tunica.

"They saw no measurable adverse effect," Bradshaw said. And she said disconnections in Vicksburg remain at the same level as the rest of the state.

I heard the same story from Tammye Christmas, manager of Vicksburg's city-owned gas and water utilities. She has been with the department 28 years.

"The casinos had no impact on disconnects or late payments here," she said.

Ditto on crime, said Vicksburg Police Chief Walter Armstrong. He has worked in law enforcement around Vicksburg for almost 30 years and saw no change from the casinos.

This all comes up, of course, because the Texas Legislature is back in session. There is talk again of bringing casinos to Texas.

And if some are opposed, that's fine. But we sure shouldn't decide the matter based on urban legends and offhand conversations.

Gambling is one area where I'm all in favor of Texas legislators passing the buck. Pass it to us, the people of Texas. Just call a statewide vote on the matter and let Texans have their say.

And in the process, we could have a robust debate that separates fact from fiction about the impact of casinos -- both pro and con.

Personally, I don't much care for casinos. But as a practical matter, I just can't see Texans continuing to subsidize the taxpayers of Oklahoma, Louisiana and Nevada in such a generous way. We could sure use those jobs and taxes right here.

If a compelling case can be made that casinos are bad, I'm eager to hear it and would vote accordingly.

But here's what I see. Thirty years ago, there were two states with casinos, Nevada and New

Jersey. Today, there are 38 states with casino gambling. Twenty-four came through state approval. The rest have American Indian casinos.

Holly Wetzel of the American Gaming Association said the list of casino states grows by one or two almost every year. I asked her if experience has led any states with casinos to outlaw them.

“Nope,” she said. In fact, in a survey conducted last year, a whopping 83 percent of local political officials and community leaders in those states called the arrival of casinos an overall positive thing, she said.

Legislators, allow us a vote. More importantly, allow us a debate based on facts.

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