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In November, New York voters approved private casinos in the state, a move advertised by supporters and on the ballot question itself as a way to create jobs, help fund schools and lower property taxes. Underlining this goal, The Upstate NY Gaming and Economic Development Act of 2013 says that only four casinos (of an eventual seven) can be developed in the next eight years, and only upstate—part of an effort to create economic stimulus for hard-hit areas in New York state.

In the Catskill region that dubious distinction inarguably belongs to Sullivan County, where an economy once fueled by tourism and hundreds of summer resorts and the so-called Borscht Belt has been in steep decline for decades. Not surprisingly, no area in the state worked harder to advance the political football of casino gambling. In the town of Liberty, where a proposed casino was to be located on the grounds of the legendary Grossinger's Resort (which helped inspire the 1987 movie "Dirty Dancing"), the bill passed with 84% of the vote. When the law passed, Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#)

came to Sullivan County for a public celebration.

It is hard to overstate the excitement in the county at the time. Unlike a manufactured resort destination like Las Vegas, the Catskills are a natural resort area and have been for more than a century. The casino dream offered Sullivan County the opportunity to turn depressed and derelict into desirable again. Yet it appears that the prize may well be snatched away.

The State Gaming Commission will oversee the new casinos (the state's first non-Indian ones) with the site selection to be made by an appointed location board. What nobody in Sullivan County expected was that its neighbor to the southeast, the relatively prosperous Orange County, would be included on the list of locales eligible to compete for a casino.

Then this month came news that some developers who had been eying sites in Sullivan County (median household income in 2010: \$42,103; unemployment rate in 2014: 6.8%) had shifted their attention to Orange County (median household income in 2010: \$70,712; unemployment rate in 2014: 5.2%). Now even the prospect of one casino in each of the two counties has begun to fade.

## Richard Altman: Casino Battle Royale in the Catskills

Written by Administrator  
Friday, 13 June 2014 22:28 -

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The reasoning behind a shift of attention to Orange County is simple and pretty sound: No one will travel farther west to get to another casino if there is one in Orange County. That makes funding a casino in Sullivan County a bad investment. What's more, given Orange County's closer proximity to New York City, day-trippers eliminate the necessity of building and staffing a large destination resort hotel.

Would such a location be a boon for developers? Absolutely. Would it achieve the declared objective of the casino bill? No way. Rather it would consign Sullivan County to years more of economic decline.

Here is a solution, though I am not the first to advance it. State authorities with the power to determine site selection should remain true to the letter, spirit and intent of the law and bring both Catskill-region casinos to Sullivan County. Then watch a megadose of economic impact go to work.

The moratorium on other casino development in the state—downstate and Long Island—lasts only for eight years. That means that Sullivan County has eight years to re-establish itself, not as a casino destination but as a resort destination with gambling. Two casinos will also settle the bankers' justifiable funding jitters. Two casinos will simultaneously double the number of construction jobs in the county (since both casinos are required to open two years from the issuance of the license). Two casinos will simultaneously double the economic impact on local businesses, and that's just in the short-term. In the long term, two casinos would double the number of hospitality jobs, spreading economic benefits throughout the area.

Two casinos competing head-to-head in Sullivan County would make the county itself, not just the casino operators, a winner. They would be forced to market themselves aggressively, bringing more attention to the area than a solitary casino might.

Casinos are not a panacea or an end-all-and-be-all solution to our economic woes. They would, however, build the county's impoverished tax base, encourage other private development and re-establish sorely lacking tourism infrastructure. That's what the people of New York state were promised the Upstate NY Gaming and Economic Development Act of 2013 would do.

*Mr. Altman,*

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