

Upstate New York Casino Plan Divides Amish and Neighbors

Written by Administrator
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Photo



An Amish farmer in Tyre, N.Y., where some of the local Amish have mounted a campaign that includes appearing silently in court and stating their views in handwriting.

Credit

Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

TYRE, N.Y. — Ever since they settled in this tiny farm town along the New York State Thruway more than a decade ago, the Amish have been a benign, generally welcome presence: guiding their buggies down local roads, delivering fresh produce to their neighbors and paying their taxes — though they do not vote.

But the possibility that a glittering casino could be built here, halfway between Syracuse and Rochester, has torn at the bonds that knit together the area's Amish and secular residents.

Bishop Daniel Schwartz, 43, who raises corn, cows and chickens across a two-lane highway from the proposed casino site, has objected to the plan in simple but dogmatic terms. He is talking about pulling up stakes and leaving the region if the project becomes a reality. And he and some of the hundreds of other local Amish have mounted a primitive but potent public relations campaign, appearing silently in court, traveling to state hearings, stating their views in handwriting. In hopes of thwarting the project, Bishop Schwartz himself, wiry-whiskered and rosy-cheeked, even granted what he said was his first sit-down interview.

Photo



Inside the farmhouse of Daniel Schwartz, an Amish bishop in Tyre, N.Y.

Credit

Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

“Gambling goes against the teaching of the Bible,” Bishop Schwartz said, “and the fruits of

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gambling are all bad.”

The town leaders, however, are having none of this. Backed by regional leaders and deeply desirous of the jobs, tourism and municipal improvements that a casino could bring, the town supervisor and others have accused the Amish of allowing themselves to be used as sympathetic props to drum up opposition, exaggerating how threatening the plan would be to their way of life, and overstating their population in Tyre — as well as their importance to it.

“As the old saying goes, everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts,” said Ronald F. McGreevy, the supervisor, who campaigned for the casino. He insisted that there were only a few Amish families in Tyre proper, which has a population of about 950. “There is certainly not going to be a mass exodus if this comes to fruition,” Mr. McGreevy said.

Clashes like the one in Tyre — perhaps the most colorful, given the cultural differences in the mix — have broken out across New York as the State Gaming Commission prepares to decide the location of up to four new casinos this fall. Expressions of local support were a requirement for each of the 16 proposals, and applicants have worked hard to demonstrate community ties: hosting job fairs, announcing business and labor partnerships, and trumpeting how residents could benefit. One bidder even promised a town new fire trucks.

Standing in the way are opponents whose objections are often emotionally charged. Environmentalists are suing to stop a \$1.5 billion project from Genting, the Malaysian casino company, over possible damage to a public forest in Tuxedo, in Orange County; leaders in Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic village in Orange County, sued over the feared impacts of two separate casinos; and opponents of a casino in East Greenbush, near Albany, accused leaders there of rigging the process by which its developer won the town’s support.

The plaintiffs all cite local officials in their complaints. But the lawsuits are also intended as a siren loud enough to be audible in the state capital.

“We wanted to show the Gaming Commission that the town’s show of community support was not so smooth and un-pockmarked as they might want it to look,” said Rodger Friedman, a member of the group opposing the casino in Tuxedo.

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Economic issues are at the heart of the appeal of the \$425 million Tyre project, called Lago, in an allusion to the nearby Finger Lakes: With thousands of slot machines, a 1,700-seat theater and a 207-room hotel, promising “the high energy and excitement of Las Vegas,” its backers say it could pour millions of dollars of revenue into a town so small it has no post office.

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Today, the busiest commercial spot in Tyre is a truck stop off the Thruway. A municipal court shares space with a dog kennel. And the upkeep on the one-room hall used for civic events is partly paid for with barbecue fund-raisers and redemption of the deposits on recyclable cans.

The closest thing to a residential hub is a small cluster of homes along a creek that feeds the [Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge](#), at the marshy northern shores of Cayuga Lake — a protected federal area that town officials say pays very little into the town’s coffers.

The casino legislation was promoted by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo as a way to help the upstate economy, and Mr. McGreevy said Lago would pay for better water, new Internet service and lower taxes, and would help stave off the need to consider dissolving the town altogether.

“Tyre deserves a chance to survive,” said Mr. McGreevy, a retired lawn-mower salesman whose town office is a converted bedroom in his home.

The casino’s developer promises Lago will create 1,800 permanent jobs, or nearly twice the town’s current population. Regional supporters include the Seneca County Board of Supervisors; a collection of labor unions, arts organizations and business leaders; and Tyre’s town board, which voted unanimously in favor of the casino plan in June.

But the townspeople themselves are divided. Earlier this year, a small group of residents formed [Casino Free Tyre](#) to try to block the project.

Defeated twice in court, the group has presented a vigorous opposition, in Albany, in protests at the casino site and in petitions blasting the town board for “selling out to a casino developer.”

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The group contends that Tyre was chosen for a casino on a bet that the Amish, who do not vote, and its rural residents would put up little fight. Indeed, Casino Free Tyre styles itself as a defender of the Amish and others who have farmed in the area for generations, and has collected sympathetic statements from Amish leaders in nearby counties and communities.

Photo



Ronald F. McGreevy, the town supervisor, supports the \$425 million casino plan. “Tyre deserves a chance to survive,” he said. Credit Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

“We as leaders of our Old Order Amish group humbly ask youce not to let a casino be build” in the area, reads one handwritten letter, signed by six Amish men representing two church districts, roughly equivalent to parishes.

James Dawley, one of the founders of Casino Free Tyre, said he worried the casino might drive away the Amish and the quiet spirituality and wholesomeness they project.

“They add a level of protection from, I guess you would say, what is a worldly influence to our town,” he said. “They are a protective barrier because of their faith.”

But casino supporters say the objections of the Amish themselves have been exaggerated in an effort to turn the sect’s piety, and its power as a symbol of old-time simplicity, into a kind of cudgel to be wielded against the casino project on behalf of other people who were simply against development.

“They are being used, for lack of a better term,” Mr. McGreevy said, “by this small anti-casino group, saying if we do this, this casino is going to be the end of life as we know it.”

Mr. McGreevy said the group’s distortions included overstating the Amish population in Tyre,

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which he put at only four families, with perhaps six or seven members in each.

Supporters also contend that the moral arguments against casinos, which once carried more of a stigma, have lost force as much of the country has legalized gambling in pursuit of budget relief.

Apprised of Mr. McGreevy's remarks, the Amish bishop in Tyre, Bishop Schwartz, took the unusual step of agreeing to an interview.

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Asked for the number of Amish he ministers to, Bishop Schwartz said his community included six families with 44 people living in Tyre, but extended to a total of nearly 350 residents in the two districts included in his area.

He said Tyre had been a nice spot for his family — he and his wife have six children, ages 13 to 23 — because of its rich, flat land, its wildlife, and “good neighbors.”

His people work long, hard days, he said, waking at 5 a.m. to tend their crops and livestock, largely avoiding politics or public life. “We try to stay out of the way and try not to be a burden, to the government, to the town,” he said. “We enjoy the countryside, and that’s going to be it.”

But Bishop Schwartz said he decided to speak out because of his profound worries about what a casino could bring: traffic, noise, bright lights and threats to what he called “the moral of the people.”

“People that are spending this money in the casino are not going to have money to make payments to pay their taxes and to eat, and that’s going to make people — they’re going to get desperate for money,” Bishop Schwartz said.

His people are pacifists, he said. “And we don’t look forward to having thieves in the middle of the night or people come knocking at the door,” Bishop Schwartz said. “We don’t know if those

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things will happen or not, but that's kind of a big concern."

Bishop Schwartz disputed the idea that the Amish were being manipulated by the casino's other adversaries. "We don't feel that way; we don't feel that they are using us," he said. "They're trying to head this off for their own good, if you will, and us too. We really appreciate it."

The tense debate has cast a pall over some public functions in Tyre, as each side has accused the other of shameful tactics. At a town board meeting in May, as several Amish people looked on, one supporter of the casino, Michael Davis, turned to them and asked why they had chosen this issue to break their long abstention from civic involvement.

Photo



An anti-casino sign.
York Times

Credit

Nathaniel Brooks for The New

"Excuse me, Amish, I think you're wonderful neighbors, and I think you're great people," said Mr. Davis, president of the Finger Lakes Building and Trades Council, which could benefit from the construction jobs that a casino would bring. "But I heard how you can't come to these things — and yet you're here. I heard how you can't go to court — and yet you were there."

Mr. Davis, who owns a farm nearby, added later that he felt the casino's potential effect on the town's rural character had been overstated.

But Mr. McGreevey acknowledged that the heated debate already had one impact. "We've got friends and neighbors now who don't speak," he said.

There have been attempts at peacemaking. Thomas C. Wilmot Sr., the chairman of [Wilmore](#), a company based in Rochester that is spearheading the Lago project, said he had offered to meet with Bishop Schwartz and allow the Amish to do business at the casino, in an area called Savor New York, where farmers, artisans and merchants could sell their wares, just off the gambling floor.

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“We’ve allocated the space at no charge,” Mr. Wilmot said.

But Bishop Schwartz seemed unmoved. “No, I don’t think so,” he said, with a small laugh.

The Amish stopped attending town board meetings after Mr. Davis’s speech. But a group of them traveled to a public hearing on the Tyre casino proposal in Ithaca last month — raising questions, again, about how they had gotten there.

Bishop Schwartz said they had paid their own way, and that the questions had prompted him to write another letter expressing his opposition. But he said he was already mulling the possibility that Lago would be approved.

Would that constitute enough of a threat for the Amish to pack up and go?

“We don’t know,” Bishop Schwartz said. But he added, “Can’t imagine living so close to a casino.”

Correction: October 5, 2014

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article incorrectly characterized the intent of a political yard sign. It was in favor of a proposed casino project in Tyre, N.Y., not in opposition of it.

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