

Bill Nemitz: Casino Lady hides a wily hand

Written by Administrator

Sunday, 01 October 2017 04:08 -

I've watched the TV spot a half-dozen times.

I've scoured the Facebook page.

And the "Yes on Question One" flier that landed in my mailbox the other day, complete with its full page of fuzzy color photos, leaves me more confused than ever.

So, here's my question: If the leadoff referendum on the Nov. 7 ballot is in fact about building a casino in York County, then where, pray tell, is the casino?

"On Nov. 7, we have the opportunity to vote yes on Question 1 and approve a new gaming and entertainment venue in York County," says the upbeat woman in the 60-second ad launched last week by the pro-casino political action committee Progress for Maine. "A place for concerts, conventions, fairs and other events for visitors and Mainers to enjoy."

Concerts? Conventions? Fairs? Other events?

What about ... what's the word ... gambling?

It's as if Casino Lady, for all her dulcet delivery, has never heard the word. Nor, apparently, is she familiar with the words "casino," "slot machines," "free drinks" or "how the hell do I get out of here?"

Casino Lady continues, "And what will it look like?"

At this point, where political messaging normally connects directly to the issue at hand, you

might expect to see a little razzle-dazzle.

Maybe one of those herky-jerky selfies of people high-fiving while a slot machine blares out like a ladder truck on its way to a five-alarm conflagration. Or a lady with blue-tinted hair mouthing “Oh, my!” as the digital readout of her jackpot goes higher, higher ... always higher.

Instead, the proposed casino will look, according to Casino Lady, “like it belongs here in Maine.”

Meaning?

Well, there’s a quick shot of a nondescript building with “The Vacationland Resort and Events Center” plastered across the front – and by nondescript, I don’t mean to discount the oversized anchor logos and the middle-of-nowhere lighthouse off to one side.

The exterior view quickly dissolves to a large room where a handful of weirdly translucent people mill around what look like a few retail kiosks and a large oval counter with no one behind it. Fittingly, nobody seems to know where they’re going.

Cut to what looks like a swanky hotel lobby, where a businessman with an oversized suitcase appears to get directions from a female concierge. A frighteningly oversized red lobster watches from a nearby floor display.

Finally, we’re whisked to an empty, very homey looking living room, complete with a massive stone fireplace and three very fancy, Paul Bunyan-size canoe paddles mounted above the raging fire.

Looks like Maine ... get it? You just got hit over the head by a canoe paddle.

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The rest of the ad trails off into the usual litany of empty promises – over 2,000 year-round, full-time jobs and much-needed revenue for our schools, seniors, veterans and more! – before Casino Lady asks us to join her and vote yes on this ... wait, what is it again?

It's more of the same in the mailer, which features still shots taken from the video's "conceptual renderings," and the Facebook page, where you can't hit the scroll button without tripping over a cute kid clinging to his or her parents or an American flag beneath a plea to help "protect" our veterans.

(Side note: There's a special place in hell for people who scheme to get rich by shamelessly exploiting support for Mainers who have served in the military.)

Now, I'm not suggesting that deceptive advertising is anything new when it comes to Maine's maniacal history of casino referendums.

But this campaign, compared to those that have preceded it over the past 14 years, achieves new lows for its abject failure to openly acknowledge what it is we'll be voting on in just over five weeks.

In an email Friday, Progress for Maine spokesman Michael Sherry noted that Casino Lady does say "gaming" at the top of the TV ad and a newspaper pullout quote that flashes momentarily on the screen (What, you missed it?) includes the word "casinos." Beyond that, wrote Sherry, "it's important for people to know that the goal for this facility is to offer things beyond gambling."

Got it. Just like the late Hugh Hefner got rich peddling Playboy for its in-depth articles.

If you've followed the news at all in recent months, you already know that this referendum is a sucker's bet if ever there was one.

Should Question 1 be approved, the rights to the casino can go only to Shawn Scott – the

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wheeler-dealer extraordinaire who more than a decade ago was lambasted by the Maine Harness Racing Commission for “sloppy, if not irresponsible, financial management and accounting practices” among his many casino-related enterprises worldwide.

The same Shawn Scott who never qualified for a license to run Hollywood Casino in Bangor and instead flipped the rights to that operation over to a national gaming company for a cool \$51 million – a scenario widely expected to repeat itself, to the tune of \$200 million, should the York County referendum pass.

The same Shawn Scott whose backroom orchestration of the York County casino is currently under investigation by the Maine Ethics Commission. More recently, he also came under scrutiny from the Legislature’s Committee on Government Oversight and Accountability, which wants to examine whether Maine’s citizen initiative process may have been abused for mercenary gain here.

“We are not suggesting the people of Maine are not smart enough to understand the referendum question they see on the ballot,” wrote Rep. Jeffrey Pierce, R-Dresden, in a letter seeking a review from the Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability.

Continued Pierce, “I am suggesting that our citizen referendum process is being taken advantage of, as evidenced by the numerous ethical violations, including the behavior of those spearheading the York County casino referendum.”

I wholeheartedly agree with Pierce’s suggestion that Maine voters, by and large, are smart enough to know that, for all the smoke and mirrors now hitting the airwaves, Question 1 is about a casino.

But fellow voters, I would also submit that Scott, his Casino Lady and all the others being paid good money to do Scott’s bidding don’t share that view.

They think we’re ignoring, or unaware of, that man behind the curtain.

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They hope we won't squint too hard at their TV spot and wonder, "Why, if this is about casino gambling, does that snazzy looking Vacationland Resort and Events Center contain not a single slot machine?"

They think they can enthrall us with gauzy promises, see-through virtual actors and a few tacky canoe paddles – while they take the money and run.

They're betting Maine is that stupid.

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