

News Article

The News and Sentinel and Marietta A.M. | February 17, 2005

Fittros: Video lottery doesn't hurt county; benefits community

By Evan Bevins

Parkersburg – the video lottery industry has had a positive impact on Wood County and is not deserving of the negative stereotypes some people think of the business.

“Good things happen even if you choose not to play,” said Tom Fittro, managing member of Trans-Allegheny Enterprises, which operates 156 video lottery terminals, “Everybody reaps the benefits.”

Wood County received more than \$21,000 in limited video lottery proceeds in December, according to the West Virginia Lottery Commission's Web site, www.state.wv.us/lottery. Only Kanawha and Berkley counties had more that month.

Wood Count Commission President Rick Modesitt said the county puts lottery money into special categories, not general operating funds. That way, they can use the money for projects but do not become dependent on it, he said. The county recently contributed \$10,000 to the American Red Cross building project.

County commissioner Bob Tebay said he is more concerned about the harm video lottery can do to the area than the money the county receives.

“I think this commission could well do without the income of these video lottery machines if we didn't have them,” he said.

Fittro's wife, Barbara, owner of Double Diamond Express in south Parkersburg, said video lottery is a form of entertainment that gives back to the community in addition to the money state, county, and municipal governments receive, the locations, known by many as cafes, provide employment, she said.

“These are not minimum wage jobs,” Barbara Fittro said.

Tom Fittro, who serves as president of the West Virginia Amusement and Limited Video Lottery Association, said the cafes also are responsible for the renovation of a number of old buildings.

The Fittros said 2004 was a good year for their businesses. The state's tax rate on video lottery is set up on a gradual scale, based on the average of the daily net income of every terminal in the state, Tom Fittro said. Since the state has not changed in two years, the net income remains about the same, he said.

While video lottery cafes are common in the Mid-Ohio Valley, continued expansion is questionable because of state and county rules, the Fittros said.

“The way that the county ordinance is currently, there's no place else in the county that I can expand,” Barbara Fittro said.

The ordinance, adopted by the Wood County Commission on May, 26 2004, says no video lottery establishment may be opened within 1,000 feet of any church, school, playground, park, recreational area, residence (unless owned by the applicant), hotel, library, state highway interchange or corridor or any other facility.

“I think you could find a lot of places that match those requirements,” Tebay said, “We're just concerned about where they are and what they look like.”

Tebay said some of the signs are too gaudy and remind some visitors of strip clubs.

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President

Anthony “Herk” Sparachane
Vice President

Lee Wesson
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Double Diamond Express does not have an exterior sign, because it shares its name with a video lottery game. The Legislature passed a bill late in 2003 banning gambling related terms from café advertisements, including exterior signs, even if it is the business' name.

Tom Fittro said concerns of excessive video lottery proliferation are somewhat off the mark. He said state statistics show that before the machines were legalized, there were 808 "gray machines" – the terminals were legal but their payouts were not – in the county as of March 2001, he said. As of Dec. 31, 2004 there were 629, he said.

The reason people think there are more, Tom Fittro said, is the state limits each location to only five machines, 10 for fraternal orders. Businesses cannot have more than five terminals unless they have another location, meaning locations can increase even if they overall number of machines has declined, he said.

Tom Fittro said it would help the public perception of video lottery if the state raised the number of terminals allowed at one location. Some locations might consolidate at that point, he said.

"I would much rather have one locations, with 10 machines that two locations with five," Barbara Fittro, who also owns the Henderson Café in Mason County.

The Fittros also question the language the county used to justify the ordinance.

The findings say video lottery establishments contribute "to blight and the degradation of the quality of life in adjacent areas" and have "a tendency to attract an undesirable number of transients."

"(Customers) do not like the references made by the different ordinances," Barbara Fittro said.

She said video lottery is a form of entertainment, engaged in by choice, by people from 21-81.

"They work for their money; they feel like they should be able to spend it however they want to," Tom Fittro said.

Modesitt said playing video lottery or other forms of gambling does not make a bad person. However, there have been problems, he said.

"I think it would be fair to say that there is social consequences attached to video lottery and gambling," Modesitt

Wood County Prosecuting Attorney Ginny Conley said there were several robberies of video locations last year. Since video lottery was legalized, there has been a substantial increase in the number of worthless checks reported as well, she said.

Several cafes worked to improve their security systems in the wake of robberies.

Video lottery is not the main draw for every location that has terminals.

"These are something that we put in as an added attraction," said Wes Peters, co-owner of River City Tavern & Grill.

Peters said the terminals are comparable to a pool table or arcade games. He said the restaurant's terminals have a few regular customers, but many players are from out-of-town and just giving it a try.

The restaurant has had no problems with any video lottery players, Peters said. He agrees video lottery locations should not be around schools and churches, but are fine in places appropriate to their target market.

"It's something that's by choice," he said.

River City limits exposure to the machines for customers who are not interested in them. The terminals are located in the restaurant's "21 Club" section, so people who legally can use them and want to have access, but people who don't want to are not surrounded by them.

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Many people associate City Perk with video lottery, but employees at the chain's Emerson Avenue location said that is not the only reason customers come in.

"A lot more people are coming in to eat than ever," said Niki Hopkins, who works at the café.

City Perk plans to expand its lunch menu once a new location opens, Hopkins said.

Mary Barrow, who works with Hopkins, said it would be hard to narrow City Perk's customers down to a single group.

"It's a big old cross-section of Parkersburg," she said.

Hopkins said the café rarely has any problems with video lottery players.

"Ninety percent of our customers are really nice," she said.

The last of the permits for the 9,000 machines allowed in the original legislation establishing video lottery were bid in 2004, but that does not mean operators and retailers cannot get more. Libby White, deputy director of marketing for the state Lottery Commission, said as some locations go out of business or other circumstances arise, there will be permits that become available again.

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