

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Karen Heller

A toxic cargo: Slots in Phila.

By Karen Heller

July 10, 2008

Remember the Khian Sea? The cargo ship, dubbed the Flying Dutchman of Debris, spent 14 months in the 1980s sailing the globe with 14,000 tons of Philadelphia's toxic incinerator dust in search of a landfill.

Know what's like the Khian Sea? Philadelphia's proposed casinos. The big boxes of slots keep moving in search of a final resting place.

Turns out citizens don't want them in their neighborhood. Which is a problem because Philadelphia, you may have noticed, is a city of neighborhoods. Local and state representatives, who like to get reelected, are fighting the current locations.

Call it NIMDE - Not In My District, Ed.

Ed Rendell is slutty for slots. He's been jonesing for gambling since he was mayor, wanting to turn the Delaware into a literal revenue stream with riverboats. He's a modern-day incarnation of *Show Boat's* Gaylord Ravenal. Now, he has settled for land on the river banks.

Slots of luck

The state is already heavily invested in bad habits: liquor, lottery, slots. Pennsylvania is one of the few places in the world where you have to visit three stores to make a decent vodka and tonic.

All that's missing in the commonwealth's portfolio are brothels - though the proposed SugarHouse sure sounds like one. (The casino Web site, I kid not, features the Archies and doggerel.)

Follow the Möbius strip of fiscal planning. The lottery supports older Pennsylvanians with tax relief and program subsidies. Older Pennsylvanians spend subsequent savings on slots to provide property- and wage-tax relief for future older Pennsylvanians. So they can some day spend those savings on . . . slots.

One of the big sells is that slots will create jobs. Well, no. Slots are highly automated machines. They'll never unionize or call in sick.

Another selling point is that casinos offer other entertainment besides shoving quarters into the insatiable maw of the Venus flytraps of gambling. With 55 percent of all their revenues designated for state coffers, casino owners book big stars in Atlantic City, where the profits are safe. Dave Mason is the only national act currently scheduled, for one night only, at Harrah's Chester racino - until the end of the year.

What slots do spawn are buses. And traffic. And people with time to kill, but less money to burn.

Playing the slots requires no skills, no experience, no understanding of probability. It's gambling for stupid people - and Bill Bennett, who made a fortune preaching virtue, only to lose \$8 million on slots.

Turns out a lot of people are stupid. Slots represent two-thirds of Nevada's gambling revenue.

So people like casinos; they just don't want to live near them. According to the Saint Consulting Group, casinos are the most opposed type of local real estate projects, tied only with - wouldn't you know it? - landfills, so the Khian Sea and SugarHouse comparison is apt.

"The reason why Vegas centered around gambling is that the city didn't have anything else to offer," says David G. Schwartz, of the Center for Gaming Research at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. "In Philadelphia, you already have a much richer cultural heritage."

Yes, but that won't stop developers from mucking it up.

Gambling man

So where to put the casinos, Slot King's revenue miracle? As it so happens, I've given this matter some thought. How about:

The Barnes Foundation (& Casino & All-You-Can-Eat Buffet): If Merion neighbors thought Renoir lovers were a nuisance, wait til they get a load of slot-happy busloads.

Lincoln Financial Field: We paid for it; let's use it. The \$521 million playpen is occupied a whopping 18 days a year, unless the Eagles play well. That gives gamblers more than 11 months of fun!

East Falls: The trick is to find a legislator who loves casinos enough to live with them. One man comes to mind. As it so happens, Governor, there's a lovely field adjacent to your city home.