

## Union College Should Oppose a Casino in its Backyard

by David Giacalone, for the *Sunday Gazette* (Schenectady NY, 8/31/14)

Two hundred years ago, the State of New York made it unlawful "for any person to entice the students of Union College . . . into the vice of gaming" by keeping within the City of Schenectady any "instrument or device for the purpose of gaming", and Union College forbade its students from playing cards or billiards, or engaging in any other vices on or off campus.

Today, New York State lets any 18-year-old gamble, and has made it possible for a full-featured casino to be located at Mohawk Harbor (the old ALCO site), one short block from the College's largest residence hall and a few blocks from the entire Union College residence complex and campus. Meanwhile, the administration of Union College, in this modern post-*in-loco-parentis* world, seems totally indifferent to a casino in the backyard of its student body. We cannot stop the State from basing its fiscal policy on the exploitation and creation of problem gamblers. But, I believe we should have expected Union College to do all it could to assure that the new Capital Region casino is placed much farther than a short stroll from its students or any other undergraduate college (or high school).

There is a significant amount of literature and scholarship on college students and gambling, and it shows that younger gamblers are particularly susceptible to becoming problem gamblers, and that the risk is greater if a student drinks large amounts of alcohol, has a peer group that gambles, or has gambling readily available nearby. Other risk factors include having easy credit available and living in an area where gambling is promoted by sanctioned entities. In the general population, the prevalence of problem gambling doubles in two years within ten miles of a new casino; what do you suppose happens to a college community that's less than a half-mile away?

You don't have to believe Union College's reputation as a "party school" to suspect that activities such as binge drinking and playing poker all day and all night are at least as evident at Union as at the typical American college. The Wellness Center at Union College has a handout on Alcohol Use in College that states, "between 25 and 30 percent of college students drink alcohol at a level that is regarded as problematic in the general population." More worrisome is the Wellness Center's handout on Problem Gambling. After noting, "It is generally thought that 5-9% of college men and 1-2% of college women are problem gamblers," it states:

"Gambling is in some ways a 'norm' among college students. The most popular games are casino activities such as cards and gambling machines."

Despite such knowledge, and the *Gazette* Letter to the Editor by Carol Hyde on June 7 raising the question, the following is the only statement that we (a City Councilman, a *Gazette* reporter, and myself) have been able to obtain about the casino from the Union College Administration:

"President [Stephen C.] Ainlay stands by his statement that we are supportive of Schenectady's ongoing revitalization efforts and understand the interest in bringing revenues and jobs to the

city. We stand ready to work with city leaders to ensure that any and all revitalization efforts dovetail with our responsibility to our students. I hope this helps in your conversations with the community.”

My inquiries for clarification as to responsibility to students and recommendations to the City have gone unanswered.

It is difficult for me to understand the refusal by the College to ward off a development that is in many ways likely to be more toxic than having a large waste incinerator proposed for the ALCO site. I suspect, however, that it might be difficult -- consciously or not -- to openly oppose a casino that is being sought by David Buicko, COO of the developer, Galesi Group. Mr. Buicko is considered a Community Partner and major fundraiser by Union Graduate College, and its ~~Dean~~ President recently nominated Buicko for a Community Hero award, saying:

"I can think of no other single individual who has had the broad and positive effect on Schenectady that Dave Buicko has had. . . . Nothing that has been done to date in Schenectady will be quite as transformational as the innovative and break-through project planned for the ALCO site on the Mohawk River that Dave initiated in the last year."

I wonder if UC President Ainlay or the parents of his students know that Schenectady casino applicant Rush Street Gaming [RSG] offers unlimited, interest-free credit to its gamblers, to be used only in the casino and payable in 30 days. Or, that RSG is experienced marketing to young gamblers. RSG's SugarHouse Casino in Philadelphia recently developed and introduced a "simplified craps game" called Props & Hops, specifically to lure young gamblers intimidated by craps' traditional rules. They also recently added a giant room with poker tables at SugarHouse and are planning a dozen poker tables in a 3000 sq. ft. hall in Schenectady.

Finally, as in the Stockade, there is likely to be an increase in several kinds of street crime in "College Park." RSG claims crime went down near SugarHouse, but it took a 14-man Police Department patrol, assigned 24/7, to achieve that result, and the study did not include DUI or prostitution. Moreover, there was a "displacement" of vehicle theft and vehicle break-ins to the surrounding neighborhoods, which have suffered much more of those crimes.

There are many good reasons for a socially-responsible university to oppose its City or State basing economic development and revenue raising on the operation of casinos. But, there seems to be no justification for Union College to remain silent when the location of a proposed casino so directly threatens its community, including the psychological, physical, social, academic and vocational welfare of its students. The casino Location Board is taking public comments on the four Capital Region applications until September 29. Does anyone at Union College care enough to write the Board a letter?