

Inspirational wins in Maine and Wisconsin

Sometimes we feel like stray dogs barking at a fast-moving train. But with a little help, it's fun to watch how those big, expensive trains can be derailed. Let me share two important stories to help remind us all how community organizations can upset even well-greased gambling locomotives.

In the past months, there were two very different "railroading jobs" rumbling across Maine and Wisconsin. Think of them as "the long and the short of it."

David Relles was in line for a flu shot at his Madison, Wisc., grocery store. It was a long line, and in the 40 minutes or so he and four or five others got to talking about the upcoming casino vote.

The Wisconsin Ho Chunk tribe had permission to open a fourth casino in the state, and wanted it located at their Madison bingo parlor. Wisconsin's governor said if the city and county favored the project in a referendum, he would approve it.

The city and county had little choice but to call the referendum. It was that or let the governor approve the casino with no public forum at all. Relles, a trial lawyer, said all of the "strangers" in the line had concerns, and everyone wondered why, with only two months to go until the Feb. 17 Wisconsin primaries, no one was doing anything. They exchanged cards, and began trading e-mails.

They took to the internet looking for information, and someone came up with that "Tom Grey" name and they called. I agreed to come to Madison and talk. Relles said he had three people to listen, and I thought that was a good number to start with. We set our meeting for Dec. 21. Then something happened that demonstrates the genius of America – the strength of people making a step -- the heart of what makes our democracy work.

Relles went to a meeting of tavern and hotel owners who were concerned about what casino competition would do to their businesses. At the end of their meeting, they had gotten nowhere and the press was outside waiting for a statement. They pointed at "that guy," Relles, and essentially left him standing with the microphone. Relles tried to explain that he had nothing to do with the tavern group, and certainly couldn't speak for them, but that he was having a meeting in a few days. Short of anything else to print, the press announced the meeting. When I arrived two days later, we had 25 interested citizens instead of three, plus full media coverage, and "No Dane Casino" was born.

The caliber of the group was impressive. There were attorneys, real estate agents,



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public relations people, and a host of “well connected” citizens who knew what they were doing.

Madison is a progressive community with a well-known and popular university, and a lively downtown district. Madison had just completed a \$100 million auditorium project to open in the fall with road shows and other entertainment. Small shops, clubs and coffee houses are a lot of what attracts youth to the university, according to another local attorney Fred Mohs, who had soon joined the group. “It’s a fun place to go to school,” he said.

The casino would have pulled business from the downtown, making it harder for them to make ends meet in the off seasons, Mohs said. Subsidized entertainment at a casino threatened to undercut the new theatre just being completed. It would have damaged the core community. But more importantly, as Mohs said “A casino had nothing to do with my image of this city,” and a lot of other people felt the same way.

Soon the group had a powerful grass roots coalition of business, church, political, civic and even university student leaders. As newspapers began printing facts, and the contradictions of gambling started to appear, the tide turned. During the last week of the campaign, the Mayor of Madison could be heard on the radio opposing the casino. Both student newspapers opposed the casino.

The casino backers paid for an eight or nine page “study” to trump up the benefits. Their “expert” turned in his paper and left town. No Dane Casinos hired Nevada gambling expert Bill Thompson, and Thompson stayed in town to defend his findings. Independent economists quickly and publicly affirmed Thompson’s work as superior, and that work revealed the social and economic costs the casino would really bring.

Milwaukee’s District Attorney came to stand shoulder to shoulder with Madison’s DA, and talked bluntly about the crime and embezzlements his city has endured since casinos arrived there. And between the two district attorneys stood the towering visage of nationally published economist and gambling expert John Kindt.

The coalition used Freedom of Information laws to uncover a regional planning study that had been done earlier and “buried.” The study pointed to social costs. The press played it as hidden information and soon the political tide turned. By then, nearly all of the county and city elected officials, the ones who would be able to spend the money shared by the casino, had turned publicly against the venture. All of those things happened because coalition volunteers, high caliber professional people, were in the community attacking every opening they could find, taking advantage of every opportunity.

No Dane Casino raised about \$60,000. That was enough to pound down the \$1.3 million spent by the gambling promoters. That \$1.3 million is five times more than any candidate has ever spent in a Dane County election. Still, against 20 to 1 money, the Madison coalition defeated the casino with a 2 to 1 margin.

Madison mayoral chief of staff Janet Piraino said the casino’s big money “turned people off.” (Madison is, after all, the home of U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold.) “The Nation sold the casino by promising all kinds of property tax relief, social service programs and education benefits . . . So when the mayor and other local officials who would benefit from the money came out and said it’s not worth it, it was an effective counter punch.”

Relles, who became the group’s primary spokesman, said television stations

“I think the biggest reason it failed is because it just didn’t fit with Madison’s character. We’re a progressive, politically active, well-educated, environmentally minded, fitness-conscious, mid-sized Midwestern city built around three beautiful lakes . . . Some say Madison is 50 square miles surrounded by reality.”

-- Janet Piraino, Chief of Staff to Mayor David Cieslewicz

did valuable features from surrounding communities showing the personal effects of addictions. Papers ran lengthy detail pieces. But the talk radio programs were where the issue was really debated. He said neighborhood meetings were crucial, and at every one he and his fellows urged people to spread the word by passing out brochures and sending e-mails. No Dane Casino ran not one single television ad. It was a campaign of home meetings, networking and e-mails. It was fast, and it was effective!

It started with a couple of great citizens getting their flu shots, and it kept a great community healthy.

Maine, on the other hand, faced a complex campaign for nearly two years. This is a battle that demonstrates both the big money involved and the relentless maneuvering the Gambling industry tries to use.

CasinosNO! organizer Dennis Bailey, a professional political consultant, recalls the first legislative bills that sought to open Native American casinos on the state’s southern border. The grass roots organizations formed early in 2002, and border communities one after another passed ordinances blocking the casino, but “they just kept shopping around,” until they found an opening in Sanford. That triggered a statewide referendum.

Gambling interests began saturating the airwaves with what would grow to a \$10 million campaign, unprecedented in Maine political history. “This is a state where you can be governor for under \$2 million,” Bailey explains.

The Maine strategy is inciteful and instructive. They chose not to attack gambling as a moral issue. Seventy percent of the population gambles regularly. Bailey said about 30 percent of voters will oppose gambling no matter what, and 10 percent will be strongly in favor of it. That huge and initially ambivalent 60 percent in the middle can be persuaded either way.

Bailey contends people know intuitively that gambling is a “sucker’s game”, and the coalition decided to hammer on the details of the proposal. “To win the game, you focus on “this deal.” Then it becomes a question of ‘Why are we getting such a rotten deal?’” Fortunately, says Bailey, “They handed us a target rich environment.”

“They talked about 10,000 jobs. That was ludicrous, but it didn’t matter. That was not a winning issue. We talked about the bad deal, corruption and money going to Las Vegas that should stay in Maine.”

Late in the campaign, CasinosNO! Attacked the “kiddie casino” allowed in the proposal. The referendum language proposed a Connecticut style “day care” in the casinos where parents could leave their children. There, children could gamble for merchandise on game machines. Mainers were appalled.

CasinosNO! kept drumming on the details, and the gambling industry’s ad

“Mainers have never been known to shy away from hard work and challenges. They also know to look at easy money solutions with healthy skepticism. And after examining the issues, they will realize the casino proposal does nothing to support economic development efforts but rather offers much that will undermine them.”

--Chris McCormick, president and chief executive officer of L.L. Bean Inc

agencies were too slow to respond. The coalition raised \$3 million of their own, broadcast a series of eight television ads, and hired nearly a dozen staff members by the end of the campaign.

Bailey said businesses are usually apathetic about gambling initiatives, but L.L. Bean was “incredibly courageous,” stepping forward to lead a powerful business movement against the casino referendum. Ultimately, businesses came to understand the damage casinos would do to local commerce with their subsidized hotels, restaurants and entertainment. Activist volunteers and staff canvassed the state with the messages of lost productivity, embezzlement and job losses that would accompany expanded gambling.

Health care professionals and environmental groups eventually came on board as well. As in Madison, the coalition was broad based.

In the beginning, Casinos NO! Was down 20 points in the polls, but they won the election by a 40 point margin – a big turnaround and a huge upset.

Bailey is astute in his analysis of the people in the middle. He said “There is no groundswell of support for casinos. It’s all top down.” The big money and muscle of the gambling industry can roll over a community unless coalitions can be built to spread the word. “People know better, but they need a little help,” as Bailey puts it.

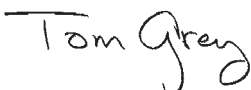
Friends, that’s what we are about. We’re out there trying to give people a little help. I was there in Wisconsin, helping to start an organization and define a strategy. People like David Relles, who gave up nearly all of his law practice for two months, will rise to the challenge. But so often the NCALG information and organizational experience is able to make a big difference, especially when coalitions are just getting started.

All people really need to do is pull together diverse groups and begin to spread the word. But they often times need a little help.

Your help.

You have been the supporters that have made all of this possible. We can’t quit now. The gambling industry is pushing harder than ever on Native Americans and state legislatures to pry their way into new prey. We need to be there to help stop them, and we need your help to get there.

Please give all you can to the NCALG or NCAGE organizations. NCAGE is the political action part of our organization. NCALG is the educational arm, and contributions to NCALG are tax deductible.



Executive Director,
NCALG and NCAGE