

NORTHAMPTON COUNTY
GAMBLING IMPACT COMMITTEE

Meeting Minutes
Monday, December 8, 2008

The scheduled meeting of the Northampton County Gambling Impact Committee was held at 6:35 PM, December 8, 2008 in the third floor County Council Meeting Room.

ROLL CALL

The following Committee members were present:

Robert Balum	Constance Nelson
Peg Ferraro	Robert Pfenning, Chair
Ross Marcus, Vice-chair	John Stoffa
Vic Mazziotti	Ann Terres
John McGeehan	

The following media representatives were present:

Bethlehem Press

The following municipalities were represented:

Freemansburg Borough	Lower Saucon Township
Hellertown Borough	

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

After soliciting input from the municipality representatives, the Committee approved the October 13, 2008 and November 10, 2008 minutes as distributed.

COURTESY OF THE FLOOR (regarding agenda items)

No comments were made by those present.

OLD BUSINESS

Municipal Grants

Peg Ferraro reported on the meeting of County Council's Intergovernmental Committee held the afternoon of December 8, 2008. The main issue dealt with at the meeting was whether the municipal grant making authority would be a new authority or whether it would be the existing General Purpose Authority (GPA). Councilwoman Ferraro feels that the GPA is an economic development authority. She questions what economic development the proposed new authority would do, and also how the new authority would be funded. Act 71 doesn't specify any funding method for the authority. The GPA has other funding sources to cover the costs of the gambling revenue grant awarding. She stated an ordinance designating the grant making authority would be introduced in January 2009. County Council is looking at how Erie County set up their gambling revenue authority. The Chair noted that Erie County is following their judge's guidelines in making grants this year pending a final Commonwealth Court ruling on the judge's decision which was appealed by Erie County.

Section 1512 of Act 71 requires public officials to divest themselves of any financial interest they may have in any licensed entity (casino owner/operator, manufacturer, supplier, vendor). Ross Marcus was asked at the November meeting to look into where the County is in carrying out the intent of Section 1512. Ross reported that he spoke to Jill Mancini, Assistant County Solicitor, and she has formed a tentative opinion that "public official" would include any elected official, appointed official or staff member that is involved in the process of allocating any of the gambling revenue. A common sense interpretation of her opinion would mean that the County Executive, members of County Council, members of the authority administering the municipal grants program and any staff advising the County Executive, County Council or the authority would be subject to the provisions of Section 1512. Ross emphasized that Jill had not finalized her opinion, nor has she had the opportunity to share her opinion with Karl Longenbach, the County Solicitor -- so this opinion is unofficial.

Other Old Business

There was no other old business discussed.

NEW BUSINESS

Reports on the Impact of the Racino in Bucks County

Four Committee members were asked to contact their counterparts in Bucks County to obtain an informal report on the impact of the operation of Philadelphia Park for about two years.

Bob Balum -- Public Safety

Bensalem Township officials reported that they used their host fee funds to add twenty new police officers and equipment. With the additional resources, the impact was minimal on the police department. Also, traffic is spread out throughout the day, and the road infrastructure was already in place for the prior operation of the facility as a racetrack. The only real impact was an increase in EMS calls. Bristol Township used its municipal grant money for police equipment since they felt the uncertainty of future funding precluded them from hiring police officers. Bristol Borough received significant municipal grant funding, but officials declined further comment since litigation regarding the funding process may be pending.

Constance Nelson -- Criminal Justice System

A Bucks County Assistant District Attorney reported immediate increases in the number of thefts, including identity theft. In addition to the ADA, Constance contacted the two district justices on Bethlehem's South Side. The casino and parking garage are located in one district and the retail, hotel and multi-purpose center are in another district. Both district justices expected additional case loads and will look to the County for additional staff. Increases in DUI's, retail theft, bad checks and homeless issues (due to neighborhood gentrification) are expected. The Committee members had a brief discussion of ways in which the increased case loads could be tracked.

John McGeehan -- County Prison

A Bucks County Prison official reported an increase in misdemeanors but not felonies. He felt that they had more problems with the annual nine day traveling fair than they did with Philadelphia Park. He also noted an increase in EMS calls. Mr. McGeehan feels that Northampton County can handle the increase in prisoners once the initial impact settles down.

Ross Marcus -- Human Services

Ross Marcus reported that the Bucks County Department of Human Services has not seen a measurable impact on the demand for human services since the opening of the racino in December 2006. This is consistent with information from other sources that the demand on human services lags behind other areas by several years. Anecdotally, Bucks County's Director of Human Services said that there are calls about senior citizens overspending their means and older adolescents sneaking into the racino.

Two Bucks County drug and alcohol and mental health providers have applied for certification, and five more are thinking about doing so. The Bucks County Director of Human Services noted that the impact of the racino could change when the casino portion goes from a temporary facility with 3,000 slot machines to a permanent facility with 5,000 machines. He is also concerned with the impact of the expected reductions in State funding of human services, especially when the impact of the racino is fully realized.

Disbanding the Committee

John Stoffa noted that this Committee first met in April 2007. He stated that we have learned a lot from the meetings and that he hopes that we will apply what we have learned. He believes that it is time to disband the Committee, and thanked the members of the Committee for their interest and dedication. He distributed Certificates of Appreciation to all of the members.

Other New Business

There was no other new business discussed.

Chair's Concluding Comments

The Chair stated that the legacy of the Committee will be the meeting minutes in his opinion. The investigation and fact-gathering phase has come to a conclusion. Now the implementation phase begins with County Council's designation of and possible creation of a municipal grant making authority. He thought that the Committee had accomplished many things.

COURTESY OF THE FLOOR (regarding any aspect of gambling's impact on the County)

The Freemansburg Borough Solicitor again advocated that the funding for the impacted municipalities be split up equally among the five entities. He also stated that he found it useful to attend the Committee meetings.

Peg Ferraro indicated that there will be an Intergovernmental Committee meeting in January for surrounding municipalities to talk to County Council.

FINAL ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 8:10 PM.