



## Don't gamble away Ottawa

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"The debate over casinos was 20 years ago. We've got to do what we can to keep some of that money on the Ontario side of the border," says Mayor Watson.

In other words, why should Lac-Leamy, Quebec take our citizens' gambling money when we can? Sounds like a solid argument at first blush, but it is coming out of a short-sighted view because gambling undoubtedly costs us more than we gain.

A 2009 study estimated that 3.2 per cent of adult Canadians are problem gamblers. Using the City of Ottawa's 2008 population estimate, this would translate into 28,741 problem gamblers in the city. Every problem gambler has parents or children or both who are affected. In fact, a study from Australia estimates that 5 to 10 people per problem gambler are affected negatively. This means that anywhere between 143,700 and 287,400 individuals in the city of Ottawa are suffering because of problem gambling.

How do they suffer? All the grocery money has been spent at the casino. The car insurance is out of reach because the slots and tables and tickets have chewed up the funds. The rent or mortgage is suddenly too expensive when gambling becomes more important than keeping a roof for your kids to sleep under.

What's the cost to a child whose mother chooses the casino after she's been pleading with her to stay? This child knows in her bones that this trip to the casino will take away any hope of fresh food in the fridge. Though she may be too young to understand the concept of rent she'll feel it when that money disappears too.

A casino is not a win-win proposition for this city when the city is seen of a community of citizens. Casinos only make money because most people lose money; a few lose big, and with them are their families, friends and employers.

But, if we get the problems, shouldn't we get the cash to help treat them? Not so fast. This is the short-term view of a politician trying to expand city coffers even though the city has increased property taxes by almost 25% between 2004 and 2010. Instead of watching its pennies, the city is turning to an additional tax which is disproportionately on the backs of the poor.

Taking money rather than making profits is the proper way to see gambling. The taking is the reason for a host of social and therefore financial problems for gamblers. Instead of bringing more gambling into our city, city council needs to understand how much money the town is spending to deal with the breakdown caused by problem gambling.

Debates on important social issues like gambling are never "over", since almost 29,000 Ottawans and their families live with the fallout of gambling daily. Maybe the research can start with them: Would they prefer to lose their rent money, their jobs, their relationships and their children locally, or in Quebec?

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