

Louisiana parish says no to river gambling

by EIR Staff

Ouachita Parish in northern Louisiana, which includes the city of Monroe, voted overwhelmingly on Oct. 16 to reject a referendum that would have allowed riverboat gambling in the region. In spite of big money put up by the gambling lobby, which spent \$500,000, as opposed to \$34,000 spent by those against gambling, the vote was 71% against.

The "no" vote was organized by a group called Citizens for Quality Life, Inc., which conducted an intensive organizing effort for several months to defeat the attempt by Louisiana Paddlewheels, Inc. to set up a casino. One of the initiators of the grassroots effort was Fred Huenefeld, a local political activist who is a longtime member of the Schiller Institute. "We knew what Bugsy Siegel and company had done to Nevada," said Huenefeld, "and we sure didn't want them to do the same thing here."

According to Huenefeld, citizens in the parish decided that they had to take a moral stand, and set about systematically to win their fight:

1) They formed Citizens for Quality Life, Inc., a group that included businessmen and a handful of ministers, who then formed an advisory board, whereupon they began reaching out to churches to get them involved.

2) They obtained a list of 20,000 people who had earlier signed a petition against riverboat gambling, set up three phone banks, and contacted as many of those people as had telephones.

3) Discovering that in some churches only 70% of the congregation was registered to vote, they proceeded to sign up the other members.

4) Through these means, they identified 14,000 people who would vote against the casino.

5) They made up T-shirts with the slogan "The Truth about Nevada Organized Gambling Is Below the Surface," and a picture of a riverboat, with a shark underneath about to surface and swallow the boat. They organized 250 children to wear the T-shirts and go visit those people on the list who did not have a phone, to ask them to vote against the referendum.

6) The host of a radio talk-show, a member of the advisory board of Citizens for Quality Life, interviewed *EIR* Counterintelligence Editor Jeff Steinberg on the theme of "Dope, Inc. and Gambling," opening up the phone lines for

listeners to ask questions.

7) On election day, 30 ministers and businessmen served as pollwatchers, assembling at 5:30 a.m., then fanning out to the various polling places to check the starting numbers on all the voting machines, and to monitor the voting throughout the day.

8) In all, 30 to 40 churches were involved, while a women's group said they had been up all night praying to sink the boat. The owner of a trucking company parked six of his tractor trailers in key locations around the city, with signs reading, "For God's sake, sink the boat!"

Casino owners respond with suit

Smarting from its Oct. 16 defeat, Louisiana Paddlewheels proceeded immediately to file a lawsuit against the Riverboat Gaming Commission, seeking to have the referendum declared null and void on various technicalities, including the allegation that the law wasn't advertised locally before it was approved, and further that it was unconstitutional because the legislature can't pass laws allowing local elections that deal with labor and trade regulations.

The gamblers, however, are hardly exuding confidence. According to the *Monroe News-Star* of Oct. 19, Lowell Chichester, president of Cashell Management, Inc. of Reno, Nevada, said that the crushing defeat of the riverboat referendum increases the chances that his company won't ask for another election. "There would have to be some real firm commitments by the cities and chamber and some other local movers and shakers," he said. "The door is still open, but I think it's going to take a realization by some of the local leaders that the money is getting away. . . . I don't have any interest in coming back and waging the same battles."

Local officials stand firm

Those who engineered the crushing defeat for casino gambling are apparently not fazed by the legal tricks and high-pressure tactics of the gamblers. Bucky Hargis, one of the leaders of the Citizens for Quality Life, is quoted in the *News-Star* describing the lawsuit as "a backdoor attempt to violate the overwhelming expression of public will."

"I am very pleased it didn't pass, and I don't intend to change my mind," said West Monroe Mayor Dave Norris.

Monroe Mayor Bob Powell said, "The reasons I objected to it, I think, will be just as valid in two years as they are now." He says he believes riverboat gambling would hurt Monroe businesses.

Monroe Chamber of Commerce President Mike Neal said the vote gives the parish a new angle on economic development. "Every community needs to have something unique to attract people," he told the *News-Star*. "A riverboat is no longer unique. People will want to come here to get away from gambling. . . . From an economic development perspective, I think it speaks very strongly of the citizens of this parish."