

Mayor of Ledyard: "I've become very cynical ..."

By **John Swinconeck**

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LEDYARD, Conn. — "I've become very cynical about this operation over the past 11 years," said Mayor Wesley Johnson of Ledyard, Conn.

Ledyard borders the Pequot reservation that's home to the world's biggest casino, Foxwoods Resort.

"There has been no economic development spin-off from the casino. Businesses do not come here," Johnson said. "Tourists come mainly to gamble. Gamblers have one thing in mind: get to the casino, win or lose their money, get in their cars, and go home."

The more people gamble, the more credit can go on the Wampum player's card, which can quickly accumulate for a free meal.

Mohegan Sun has their own gas station which pumps 170,000 gallons a month, tax free. That's 170,000 gallons that's not going to a local station, Johnson said.

"You can pretty much get whatever you want at a casino," he said.

Connecticut State Trooper Todd Lynch is the resident state trooper of Ledyard. The town pays about 70 percent of his salary to act as the head law enforcement official. He's had the job for one year and four months, and he was raised in the area. Today he heads up a 42 member sworn-in civilian operation.

Since Foxwoods opened in the early 1990s, much about law enforcement has changed.

"The single biggest problem was traffic," Lynch said. "Accidents, the amount of offenders, speeding, OUI. When you have 40,000 come through your town daily, traffic becomes your biggest problem."

While the casino does give slot revenue to the state, Lynch's department does not receive any money directly from the casino.

"The frustrating part is using the budget in place - taxpayer money - to take care of the problems caused by a money making machine," he said.

Lynch said Ledyard is a town of 15,000 with no limited access highway to Foxwoods, unlike Mohegan Sun.

"Everyone of those 40,000, at some time, have to come onto Ledyard roads," Lynch said.

According to Lynch, people quickly find their way onto back roads and shortcuts, so it is no longer just the major roads that are impacted by casino traffic.

When the casino opened, Lynch said residents began complaining about littering and public urination on the roads, plus serious motor vehicle complaints.

State police has jurisdiction on land owned by the casino and everywhere else. Ledyard police cannot enforce the law on tribal land or at the casino. Tribal police can only enforce federal laws on their land, but both the perpetrator and victim must be Indians.

"It can get confusing, not only in finding out where you've got proper jurisdiction but with whose involved," Lynch said.

Lynch's advise for law enforcement in Maine is to make sure law enforcement arraignments are "straight and narrow." Expect also a tremendous influx in the amount of traffic.

"The number of accidents and drunk driving arrests have no where to go but up," he said.

In Ledyard, at one point, the tribes agreed to pay for a "loop patrol" around Foxwoods, Lynch said. Because of that patrol, the following was discovered:

In 1994, 3,500 tickets were written, 55 drunk driving arrests made. In 1995 4,200 tickets were written, with 50 drunk driving arrests. In 1997, 2,000 tickets written, 57 drunk driving arrests. The tribe then cut funding for the program.

In 1999, 332 tickets were issues with 20 drunk driving arrests. In 2001, 477 tickets with 40 drunk driving arrests.

Lynch said the same amount of offenders are out there now that were there in the mid 1990s. There's not as much money for enforcement, so the number of tickets and arrests decreased.

Regardless of the \$480 million Connecticut will get this year in slot revenues, Johnson said it's a "drop in the bucket" compared to a \$13 billion budget with a \$2 billion deficit. Houses on Route 2 (which leads to Foxwoods) have lost 10 to 20 percent of their value, according to Johnson. The only new business on that road is a Dunkin' Donuts, he said.

"They tell you there will be economic development spinoff, and they will work to have that happen, but they don't want it to happen. They want it all controlled in the casino so people will stay there and gamble," Johnson said.

"The only saving grace is the more casinos there are, the more people will drive to the closest one," Lynch said. That means less driving through Ledyard to Foxwoods.

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