

CARLO ROTELLA

On second thought, repeal casinos

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I HAVE been getting e-mails and calls for the past couple of months from a group called Repeal the Casino Deal, which has set out to amass 69,000 signatures by Nov. 20 as a crucial step in the process of putting a repeal of the state's casino law on the ballot in

2014. At first I resisted, mostly out of instinct: *The law already passed. It's a done deal. Why are these do-gooders bothering me?* But they wore me down. I will sign their petition, and I think it's worth explaining my reasons.

It's not because I feel any kind of moralizing urge to meddle in the business of my fellow citizens. If consenting adults derive ritual satisfaction from transferring their capital to large corporations in the course of playing repetitive sedentary games against quixotic odds, I am not moved to interfere. You want to gamble? Knock yourself out.

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I'm also not particularly moved by the concept of gambling addiction, a medical-sounding label for what I see as an unwillingness to put up a real struggle against impulses that fall something short of irresistible. If that sounds hardhearted and unenlightened to you, this will sound worse: If casinos ever do get built in Massachusetts, I will probably spend time in them because they will likely host a better class of boxing matches than the state offers now. I might even gamble a little while I'm there, if there's roulette, mostly because I enjoy the skip-ticking of the ball on the wheel, the croupier's patter, and the look and feel of chips on green felt — at least until the fundamental tedium of the game eclipses its sensory pleasures.

But I will sign the petition to repeal the casino law because I'm convinced that casinos are bad for just about any community. It's in my narrow self-interest to try to stop them even if nobody's trying to build one in my town — if they're bad for the state, they're bad for my family — and I also feel a certain broader duty as a citizen, one neighbor among many.

The preponderance of good research on the subject is summarized in a recent and widely cited report entitled “Why Casinos Matter: Thirty-One Evidence-Based Propositions from the Health and Social Sciences,” issued by 33 creditable scholars and other experts assembled by the Institute for American Values. For me, the essence of their argument is that casinos tend to erode and destroy the social, economic, and political fabric of a community.

The report observes that “the benefits of casinos are short-term and easy to measure while many of their costs are long-term and harder to measure.” For example, “the opening of a new regional casino may offer an economic stimulus to distressed

communities, but the stimulus fades over time, as the presence of a casino drives out established local businesses and attracts other gambling-linked businesses, such as payday lenders, pawn shops, auto title lenders, and check cashing stores.”

There are other effects to take into account — like rises in crime, government corruption, and problem gambling — beyond the core finding that casinos extract wealth from communities and weaken nearby businesses and property values. And as more and more of them compete for a region’s dollars, a process now underway in New England, we can expect a “downward economic spiral of market saturation, sluggish state revenues, and failing casinos.”

There’s one more reason I’ll sign. I find it encouraging that citizens are getting together to stand up for themselves against the companies and politicians offering them a bad deal. Like the voting-down of casino initiatives by towns around the state, the gathering into a budding repeal movement of various local anti-casino coalitions and other groups (including not only some I admire but also some I don’t, like the intolerant scolds of the Massachusetts Family Institute) is a sign of life in our political culture. Corporate gambling, like marketing in general these days, is all about separating individuals from each other — reducing a community, a polity, to a set of disconnected consumers who don’t add up to much more than their respective data profiles and net worth. Saying no to casinos is also saying no to that.

Carlo Rotella is director of American studies at Boston College. His latest book is “Playing in Time: Essays, Profiles, and Other True Stories.”