**No More Gambling, Thank You**

ocal Baptist minister Perry Sanders says he can't remember when the people of Lafayette were so united on a political issue. The issue: casino gambling in the city. The position: No.

Everyone's against it, Sanders says, "with the exception of an elected official [Kenny Bowen] and a daily newspaper [The Advertiser]."

Evidence for Sanders' analysis came last week during two public hearings in Lafayette called by a House committee which oversees gambling in the state. State Rep. Raymond "LaLa" Lalonde, chairman of the House Criminal Justice Committee, wanted to hear local views on the gambling issue. He and his fellow committee members got what they wanted.

Actually, they heard only one point of view. Not one person stepped forward at the sessions to speak out in favor of bringing casino gambling to Lafayette. Mayor Kenny Bowen, who favored the concept earlier this year, was not present, and neither was Ken Guilbeaux, a Lafayette businessman who prevailed upon Lalonde to introduce a bill last session to allow riverboat casinos on the Vermillion River. No one from the hotel or tourism industry endorsed the idea.

The only positive words about gaming came from Carencro Mayor Tommy Angelle, who cited the positive effects of the Evangeline Downs racetrack, off-track betting parlors and video poker machines on his city. "Gambling -- has been good for Carencro," he said.

Opposition to casinos in Lafayette came from numerous quarters. Individuals representing the business and religious communities lined up to denounce the idea. Many predicted a decline in the quality of life in the city if new forms of gambling were allowed to locate here, as they have in other parts of the state. Those who spoke out also urged that a referendum be required before casino gambling is located in the city.

One of the most telling pieces of testimony came from former state Rep. Don Bacque, who admitted his role in the expansion of gambling in Louisiana. Bacque noted that he voted in favor of the lottery, riverboat gambling and video poker during his four years in the Legislature, when all of those forms of gambling were legalized. Bacque now admits he was wrong. "I stand before you today, regretfully, because I cast those votes," he told his former colleagues on the committee. "Let's have a moratorium. Stop it right now. Let it sit."

Opposition to casinos, as expressed at last week's public hearings, was based on several different viewpoints. **Quality of life.** A group of local citizens led off the hearing with a perspective on how gambling might affect the energy industry's relationship with Lafayette. Jim Prince, a top executive with Stone Petroleum Corp., noted that the advent of telecommunications means that energy producers no longer need be geographically close to oil and gas fields. Now, they can choose a location for an office based on the quality of life there. And casino gambling would reduce the desirability of Lafayette in that respect, he said.

**Legislators at Public Hearings on Gambling in Lafayette Parish Got a Very Clear Message**

That theme was picked up by Realtor Gail Romero, who heads a large Lafayette brokerage firm. Romero says she polled the owners of the 10 largest real estate firms in Lafayette and found that nine were opposed to gambling here. (The 10th was undecided.)

She noted that the real estate industry had bounced back here after a severe depression because of hard work and economic development. Gambling is simply not needed in that mix of jobs, she said.

"We are more diversified than we've ever been," she said. "We have built a very solid base. And with that does not come the side effects [of gambling]."

Glenn Richard, vice president of a statewide property management firm, agreed with Romero's analysis. He noted that Lafayette (which does not have casinos) is the fastest growing commercial real estate market in the state, while New Orleans' central business district (where a number of major casino projects are planned) is the weakest.

"Gambling changes the makeup of the community; it changes the profile of the community," said Realtor and Parish Councilman Daryl Schouest. "The majority of the people in my district are not in favor of extending gambling."

Possibility of corruption. Several speakers discussed the problem of corruption, which stems from gambling. "My perception is that [gambling] is not squeaky clean," said Peyton Cochran. "I smell the smell of rotten eggs." He singled out Lalonde for criticism, noting that one of his sons is employed by the lottery commission. "It is my opinion that is not right, even if it is legal," he said.

Gambling and the tourism industry. Local soft drink bottler Larry Smith, who has been active in tourism development, told committee members that this community has enough assets, such as its food and Cajun spirit, to attract visitors. "We don't want gambling in the package," he says.

And Bacque noted that casinos in Lake Charles, Kinder, Marksville and Charenton—just an hour's drive away from the city—will attract any needs in that regard. "If someone wants to gamble, they will have that opportunity," he says.

Effect on Evangeline Downs. Lalonde held the second of the two hearings in Carencro, which is the center of his district. Much of the testimony there centered on the effect of expanded casino gambling on Evangeline Downs, which is located in Carencro and provides numerous full- and part-time jobs to area residents.

William Fogelman, president of the company which owns the track, outlined the problems of the Louisiana horse rac-
INSURANCE AGENT GENE FORTIER WAS ONE OF MANY BUSINESS PEOPLE WHO URGED THE COMMITTEE TO KEEP CASINOS OUT OF LAFAYETTE. BEHIND FORTIER IS SOFT DRINK BOTTLER LARRY SMITH.

...Bone said. But there are fewer individuals providing those employment opportunities. I see people getting out of the racing industry. I see a lot of owners getting out of the business. I see a lot of trainers getting out," he said.

During his testimony, Fogelman did not broach the idea of locating a casino at the track, as has been suggested in some

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quarters. Interviewed after the hearing, Fogelman says his company is not pushing the idea of a casino, but would like to be a part of one should it be located in Lafayette. "If they are going to have additional forms of gambling, it is going to have to be handled at the track," he said. "It needs to be at the track. We have the facilities for it."

The problem of addiction. One of the most eloquent pieces of testimony came from local psychologist Lynn Aurich, who discussed the destructive effects of addictive gambling. Compulsive gamblers, said Aurich, generally commit very serious crimes against property, resulting in losses to business and individuals. "They not only cannot control their gambling, they lose everything," he said. "They end up in deep trouble with the law."

Bringing casinos to Lafayette would merely make it easier for addictive gamblers to indulge their compulsion. We open up yet another area of potential addictive behavior," he said.

The onslaught of testimony against gambling was so great that, by the end of the second hearing, the committee members were distancing themselves from any proposals to bring casinos to Lafayette. And an impassioned plea from local businessman Dale Sisley to stop the expansion of gambling in the state elicited a round of applause from the representatives, who insisted they are looking for ways to control expansion, not foster it.

"I'm ashamed of the proliferation of gambling in the state of Louisiana," said state Rep. Roy Quezaire of Donaldsonville. "It's a monster that can really bite us all. There is nothing to be proud of."

LaCaze agreed. "I'm not pleased with the way the gambling industry has developed," he said.

State Rep. Donald Ray Kennard: "I keep hearing today: a moratorium, a moratorium, a moratorium. I'm concerned about our state's image."

Committee members stressed that there are no bills at the present time to allow casino gambling in Lafayette. But observers close to the issue insist that proposals to bring casinos here are being considered in behind-the-scenes meetings. Likely, any attempt to expand gambling will take place under a legislative end-run—as it was during the 1993 session—rather than through a carefully cultivated show of public support.

Lafayette's legislators—if faced with such an issue—have to deal with what appears to be overwhelming local opposition to the idea, assuming last week's hearings are any gauge of public opinion. Only a couple of local legislators were present at the hearings. Sens. Donald Cravins and Mack Jordan attended, while Sens. Armand Brinkhaus and Craig Romero and Reps. Wilfred Pierre, Chris John, Jerry LeBlanc were no-shows. Presumably, they'll hear what went on.

Members of the Criminal Justice Committee, who would review any bills to expand gambling to Lafayette, know how local residents feel on the issue, after spending a day in the parish.

"We're surely got the message."