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Are casinos in cards?

Many Catholic parishes and schools have reason to thank God for bingo and other games of chance.

Overall, bingo and other games of chance provided 9 percent of the total 1997 revenue in 44 parishes that reported such information to the Diocese of Rochester. For some, it provided 20 percent.

And across the state, bingo is a significant fundraiser for dioceses, according to the New York State Catholic Conference.

While the state conference has little to say against parish- and school-run bingo and games of chance, it is taking on what it regards as a more potentially dangerous form of gambling — commercial casinos.

Gov. George Pataki stated in January that the legislature should once again begin the process of passing a measure permitting such expansion, a 1996-97 attempt having failed.

"Our message is we're here, we're on top of the issue and we're not going to be quiet about it," said Richard Barnes, lobbyist for the Catholic Conference. A multi-denominational opposition force that included the conference lobbied at the capitol Feb. 24 against any revived attempt to legalize commercial gambling.

Two years ago a proposed constitutional amendment made it through the first round of approval by the legislature, but failed in the required second round in 1997 before it could go to the voters. Although the coalition had a part in that defeat, Barnes said, so did the fact that New York City was not included as a potential casino site. The proposal specified only the

Niagara Falls-Buffalo, Saratoga-Lake George and Catskill Mountains areas.

Opposition to casino gambling is on the conference's Public Policy Forum agenda, which won the state bishops' unanimous support. They and other Catholics will take their concerns to Albany March 10.

Bingo vs. casinos

Barnes reports that people often ask him why the conference opposes casino gambling but not bingo.

"The proper response is that we're not opposed to gambling when it is recreational, for amusement and is done in a way that doesn't jeopardize the economy of the family and is not done compulsively," he said.

"Bingo and charitable forms are set apart. When somebody goes to St. Mary's down the street for a bingo game, they know the dollar they put down for a bingo card goes to the school or the church, and is a charitable event.

"Casinos, on the other hand, give money to a corporation whose sole purpose is to take your money for their benefit. It goes to corporate investors. The employees are trained to take money from patrons."

Casino games are fast-moving and have high stakes, he noted.



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