

Eye on Washington by Katherine Notley

Casinos in the capital

Opposition slams the mayor's pitiful scheme to add to the revenues—and the crime problems—of the District of Columbia.

Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly has a proposal to introduce casino gambling into the District of Columbia. She says that she wants to use revenues to finance the building of a new convention center. But she did not seem to reckon on the storm of opposition that flared up when City Councilman John Ray, who has termed Kelly's attempts to introduce gambling "clandestine," convened a public hearing on Sept. 24 to put a spotlight on the plan.

Among the witnesses who denounced the scheme was Schiller Institute spokesman Dennis Speed, known here for his role in leading the campaign to remove a statue of KKK founder Albert Pike from Judiciary Square, and for coordinating a series of hugely popular Classical music concerts dedicated to the memory of Marian Anderson and Martin Luther King.

Speed showed how similar efforts to build casinos on Indian reservations involved manipulation of Indian tribes by criminal elements. He recounted how he had accompanied Rev. James Bevel, then running for vice president on the LaRouche-Bevel ticket, to North Dakota, to confer with Indian leaders opposed to the casinos on moral grounds.

Speed hit home in this predominantly black city by exposing the role of the casino owners, Sun International, in the concentration camp-like bantustans, to which South Africa's black people were confined under the apartheid regime. The biggest business in the South African "homelands" is casino gambling, with Sun International at the center, Speed reported, introducing the documentation in a Jan. 15,

1993 *EIR* feature. "Do you think that the Indians of Standing Rock Reservation had any idea, or were told anything, of the background of their new casino manager?"

Mayor Kelly began with very brief testimony presenting the desperate argument that the plan would create jobs and revenue. She then left without waiting to hear from her fellow citizens.

Deputy Mayor for Economic Development George Brown testified in favor of the scheme and was pressed by Ray to substantiate details, such as his claim that the scheme will create 3,000 jobs. When Ray complained that Kelly had never presented a concrete proposal, Brown responded that the hearing had been called on short notice, and there had been no time to put one together. Asked what companies would be running the casinos, Brown admitted that both domestic and international companies would be involved.

Many of the witnesses—of a total list of 51, about 30 actually testified—were community activists and ministers. Almost all were against the scheme. Many spoke eloquently of the bad moral example casinos would give to D.C.'s children. The president of the Columbia Heights Neighborhood Coalition emphasized that it was critical to quash the proposal at an early stage. She cited the example of Atlantic City where hefty community opposition to gambling was worn down by high-powered, well-financed propaganda mounted by the gambling interests. She also argued that adoption of the scheme would hurt the statehood

drive, a popular issue here: "If you want to govern, you must show that you can govern yourself, and to invite in gambling does not show that." What Washington really needs, she advised, is a comprehensive plan for developing small and middle-sized businesses.

A former casino manager from neighboring Prince George's County, Maryland testified to the spread of irrationality that follows casinos. He had seen people pawning away their last possessions, he said.

Speaking for the casino interests was one Mr. Crooks of the Casino Resource Group. (Ray, rumored to be planning to run against Kelly for mayor next year, referred to him throughout his testimony as "Mr. Crook"). Casino opponents, he said, would deny residents jobs, and he promised that employees would make an average wage of "\$25,000 a year, including tips." He also tried to drum up support by saying casinos could be a source of funding for schools.

Other "expert" testimony came from the president of Renew Entertainment Corp., Stephan Saunders. His demurral was that "only one" type of casinos was under discussion, which would take up "only" 20% of the space in the new convention center. He promised that his group would help fund the convention center, and offered the District of Columbia partial ownership of the new center. Repeating the claim that 3,000 jobs would be created by casinos, he averred, "In all my years of being involved with the entertainment industry, I have never seen any evidence of organized crime."

Both Crooks and Saunders said that their groups are based in Delaware (with its famously lax corporate laws) and headquartered in New Jersey, where casino gambling, and organized crime, are well entrenched.