

## Marge Anderson: A metro-area casino would hurt the others



David Joles, Star Tribune

If the Cities had another casino, would gamblers bother to drive to places like Mille Lacs?

Location, location, location: It matters for the gaming industry, too.

**By MARGE ANDERSON**

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Gubernatorial candidate Mark Dayton told reporters on Monday that if he is elected, he will push for a new casino in the Twin Cities that will share revenue with the state. "I don't see how this has any effect on any tribe, other than Mystic Lake," he said.

What Dayton is proposing is nothing new. From the moment that Minnesota's first tribal casinos began lifting tribes out of poverty, others have been trying to open up the state to privately owned casinos. But Dayton's reasoning -- that a new casino won't harm tribal casinos outside the metro area -- needs correcting.

Imagine if a lake the size of Mille Lacs, and with as many fish as Mille Lacs, were plopped into the metro area. Do you think that people in the Twin Cities would still flock to the real Mille Lacs Lake for fishing?

I think most of us would agree that people who used to drive north one or two hours to Mille Lacs would instead drive 15 minutes to the local lake to do their fishing. Mille Lacs would still be a great lake, but it would be in a less convenient location for most of the population. And that one strike against it would be impossible for many of the businesses around the lake to overcome.

This same reasoning applies to casinos.

Currently the biggest threats to Minnesota Indian gaming are proposed racinos at the Running Aces and Canterbury Park horse tracks in the Twin Cities -- just another iteration of the metro casino Dayton has in mind. Financial experts calculate the revenue losses at the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe's casinos -- Grand Casino Mille Lacs and Grand Casino Hinckley -- to be 30 percent to 40 percent if the racinos open. And these are just two of the state's 18 tribal casinos, many of which draw a significant portion of their visitors from the Twin Cities.

Some would say that tribal casinos would just need to become better competitors if a privately owned casino were to open in the Twin Cities. Of course we would do everything we could to compete; we already do. But location will always be a major factor in people's decisions, no matter how good we are otherwise.

Speaking for the Mille Lacs Band, our biggest issue with the racinos (and with a Twin Cities casino in general) is job loss. Rather than create new jobs, racinos would relocate thousands of jobs in rural communities to the metro area. The loser would be the people of rural Minnesota, where good jobs with benefits are as badly needed today as when Indian gaming was created. And just as a reminder, the state allowed Indian gaming in the first place to create jobs and boost the outstate economy.

Jobs aside, some people also have a false impression that if more casinos are built, more people will gamble. But studies show that Minnesota's gaming market is saturated. This means that overall, the people interested in gaming are already doing so. Neither racinos nor any other version of the same casino idea can force a market to grow. Any state leaders who envision money blowing through the Capitol's doors need a reality check.

Especially in today's challenging economy, casino revenues are no guarantee of wealth. That's why the majority of tribes are still working hard to bring their reservations out of poverty.

The Mille Lacs Band has made a lot of progress thanks to gaming revenues, and we do what we can to help band members, neighboring communities and local charities. But we still have significant unmet needs in comparison to the general population; we certainly haven't earned enough to make anyone wealthy.

Indian gaming is a proven, effective tool in meeting the need for outstate jobs and economic development without any state financial assistance. When so many problems today need fixing, why break a system that works?

Marge Anderson is chief executive of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.