

Elections have both sides counting their winnings

Casino proponents and foes have something to be thankful for this holiday season.

After Election Day, gambling foes declared victory because voters in three states and Guam rejected the use of slot machines in their jurisdictions.

But casino executives still had plenty to cheer about at this year's Global Gaming Expo, where bosses ticked off at least five other states where gambling is expanding.

While anti-casino groups often take credit for defeating casino initiatives, existing gambling interests – including lotteries and tribal casinos – often fund efforts to defeat commercial casino initiatives, said Frank Fahrenkopf, chief executive of the American Gaming Association.

In Rhode Island, money from operators of slot machine venues helped bankroll an expensive effort to defeat a well-funded effort by Harrah's Entertainment to develop a casino resort with a local Indian tribe.

While voters turned down slot machines in Ohio, the state is already in the gambling business with its lottery, one of the nation's largest, Fahrenkopf said.

Slot machines will be jingling by Christmas in Florida, where voters in 2004 approved up to 1,500 slots each at racetracks and jai alai facilities in Broward County.

After political infighting and regulatory controversies, Pennsylvania will fire up tens of thousands of slot machines at racetracks over the next several months, with casinos to follow in the next couple of years.

New York recently turned on thousands of video poker machines, with a casino plan by MGM Mirage still on the horizon in Queens.

Delaware legislators this year allowed racetracks to add thousands more slot machines, while Indiana's 11th casino opened this month.

It has been at least two years since a state has approved casinos, while gambling proponents spent tens of millions on failed initiatives in Nebraska, Ohio and Rhode Island, anti-casino groups say.

Would you rather live next to a landfill, a casino or Wal-Mart?

The American Gaming Association and Harrah's Entertainment have trotted out independent surveys over the past several years showing that most Americans don't object to gambling. While that may be true, it doesn't mean all of those folks want casinos nearby.

That's the finding of a recent poll, and it comes as no surprise to casino companies that have had to overcome neighborhood opposition to casinos that, in some cases, were already approved by legislators or voters.

The poll, conducted by Saint Consulting, a Massachusetts firm that helps clients win land-use battles, found that 80 percent of Americans would oppose a casino proposed in their community. Only 16 percent said they would support it and 3 percent were neutral.

People who are older, richer, more educated and conservative were more likely to oppose casinos than their younger, less-educated and less-affluent neighbors.

Only landfills were less popular than casinos, the survey found. Power plants and quarries fared somewhat better, with

66 percent and 63 percent, respectively, opposed to them, the poll said.

Shopping giant Wal-Mart also got a thumbs down as a prospective neighbor from 63 percent of the respondents, followed by 62 percent opposing large shopping malls and 55 percent opposed to living near home-improvement stores.

„This finding may come as no surprise in a nation that wants to shop at Wal-Mart but doesn't want one built nearby, and where a huge appetite for electricity seems inconsistent with high opposition to new power plants,“ the consultants wrote in Michael Pollock's Gaming Industry Observer, the casino industry newsletter that published the survey.

„Not in my back yard“ sentiment previously concentrated on the East and West coasts is now permeating the heartland, making once-routine developments more difficult for developers, they said.