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Item Type	article;event
Authors	Carmichael, Barbara Anne;Jones, Jan Louise
Download date	2024-10-12 20:04:14
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/48113

Where the Chips fall: Cultural Resentments and Unexpected Impacts of indigenous owned casinos in Southeastern Connecticut

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the results of two academic studies related to the development of two native owned casinos, Foxwoods Casino and the Mohegan Sun, and the associated impacts and attitudes of local residents in Southeastern, Connecticut. Academic surveys were conducted within a few years after the opening of each casino. The casinos are located in close proximity to each other (about 20 miles apart) within a predominantly rural region. The differing histories of the two tribes and their changing relationships with the surrounding Connecticut residents provide an interesting study in cultural politics in which economic development is situated within the cultural, social and political relations that surround it. The perceptions of local residents in nearby Connecticut towns provide evidence of their perceived benefits and costs of casino development, as well as their changing relationships with their Indian neighbors. The results of both studies found that concerns were raised over the control and the scale and pace of development in which the surrounding US residents had no control. Unexpected issues were raised in the Mohegan Sun study about the influx of immigrant workers to the casino and their resulting impact on the towns public resources. Results of the Foxwood's study indicate that the community is particularly preoccupied with the notion of tribal sovereignty and federal recognition. These cross sectional case studies compare and contrast some of the following major themes: development issues, native tribes as neighbors, ethnic diversity, tribal sovereignty and, impacts on education. These studies highlight some of the major themes and implications of the development of native owned casinos from the resident perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the results of two academic studies related to the development of native owned casinos and the associated impacts and attitudes of local residents in Southeastern, Connecticut. It follows the call for research by Hsu in her statement:

It is crucial to understand the impacts of Native American gaming on surrounding non Native American communities. These communities usually do not have any direct input on gaming policies and operations on reservations; however, the quality of life in those

communities could very much be changed because of those gaming operations (Hsu, 1999, p. 230).

Several papers have been written about the growth of casino gaming in North America during the last decade of the twentieth century (Meyer Arendt and Hartmann, 1998, Eadington, 1995, Perdue et al., 1999), but few studies have focused on Indian gaming (Lew and Van Otten, 1998) and its associated impacts on surrounding communities. Stokowski (2004, p. 406) suggests that Indian gaming “is of substantial interest, but has received relatively little scholarly attention”. This is despite the fact that it is now almost twenty years since the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988 in the United States opened the door to Indian Gaming on reservation land. Casino developments have proven to be major catalysts for economic growth, wealth creation and reinforcement of sovereignty for most tribes that have adopted them. However, there are a number of economic, social and environmental impacts that accompany such changes in casino tourism that have affected both indigenous and local US surrounding communities. Research focus and debate has shifted from whether or not to develop casinos to questions investigating the nuances of these impacts, not just from the economic perspective but from the wider cultural and sustainability perspective (Carmichael, 2001, Piner and Paradis, 2004) .

Large casino developments were identified by McIntosh et al. (1994) as a major force in the tourism industry. Large casino resorts, like other forms of mass tourism bring with them benefits and costs which may be perceived differently by local groups. Peck and Lepie (1989 p.203) suggest that both the rate (magnitude and speed) of development and amount of community involvement and control (power) over change affect the amount and distribution of payoffs and trade offs associated with increased tourism. Rapid changes can be particularly disruptive, especially for a controversial attraction like a casino, where attitudes and social representations are likely to be more polarized and in the situation of gaming on American Indian land, where Indian and surrounding communities are further divided on an ethnic basis (Carmichael et al., 1996).

This paper focuses on an area in Southeastern Connecticut that has experienced rapid changes as a result of two mega-resort casinos developed on the reservation lands of the Mashantucket Pequot tribe (Foxwoods Resort Casino, opened 1992) and the Mohegan tribe (Mohegan Sun Casino, opened 1996). Academic surveys were conducted within a few years after the opening of each casino. The casinos are located in close proximity to each other (about 20 miles apart) within a predominantly rural region. The differing histories of the two tribes and their changing relationships with the surrounding Connecticut residents provide an interesting study in cultural politics in which economic development is situated within the cultural, social and political relations that surround it. The perceptions of local residents in nearby Connecticut towns provide evidence of their perceived benefits and costs of casino development, as well as their changing relationships with their Indian neighbor. This paper presents some of the ‘hot button’ issues, particularly the cultural resentments and unexpected social impacts of casino developments.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative data were gathered as part of wider and more quantitative studies of casino impacts. While not all respondents provided answers to these open ended questions some interesting conclusions were revealed by those who did. The Mohegan Sun data was collected in 2002, five years after the opening of the casino. A systematic random sample of 400 was drawn from the population of 8,500 Montville registered voters. A sample of 400 was drawn to account for potential non-deliverables due to changes of address or incorrect labeling. A total of 218 responded to the survey giving a response rate of 54.5%. Almost fifty percent (117) of respondents added a qualitative comment at the end of the survey. In 1995, three years after the opening of Foxwoods casino, a five percent systematic sample of telephone numbers was selected for the towns of Ledyard, North Stonington and Preston that surround the Mashantucket Pequot reservation. Of the 285 households contacted, 203 responded giving a response rate of 71.2 percent. The open ended questions included a) responses to reasons for supporting or not supporting gaming as an economic development tool (169 responses); b) reasons why attitudes toward the tribe had become more, less favorable or stayed the same since the casino opened (168 responses) and; c) any other comments that they would like to add about local casino development (109 responses).

FINDINGS

Data presented in this paper reflects the perceptions of local residents who live in Connecticut towns close to the Indian gaming establishments. While some of the dialogue addresses immediate issues, some are deep-seated and reveal historical relationships with the nearby Indian communities. For both locations, the casino resort was in the early stage of rapid product development. Resident comments and reactions may reflect 'social disruption theory' (Perdue et al. 1999) where they are faced with major unexpected changes in the quality of their environment and experiences. The 'issue attention cycle' idea outlines that when new issues catch media attention and affect resident lifestyles and perceptions, usually in the early stage of an event or threat, such issues may become 'hot button' items. In the following discussion, residents are in the early stage of coping with a mega-resort in their midst and are venting their views.

The focus of this paper is on the 'hot button' issues that seemed to be specific to the setting and context. These issues are directly related to changing power relations in the region and competition over space, as well as related to the large scale and rapid pace of development. The following issues emerged as 'hot button' impacts for one or both of the casino developments at the time of the surveys.

Development and Planning

It appeared that while people may, in general, feel that the Mohegan Tribe respects the issues facing the town, they also did not feel that they have access to the decisions being made in relation to the casino. Several respondents stated that the tribe worked with the town to ensure that the town's concerns were being met while others argued that the residents of Montville have no say in what happens on tribal land or in relation to casino development. Most agreed that it is important to maintain a working relationship between the Mohegan Tribe and the Town of Montville. Some compared their situation with the nearby Foxwoods scenario. Some of the positive responses are listed below:

“The Mohegan Sun developers did a good job including Montville in their plans and construction. It is a much better environment than Foxwoods. All casinos developed should be responsible for the increased costs for services- it should not be placed on the local taxes. Tribes should be as “town friendly” as the Mohegan’s have been this far.”

“I grew up and know many Mohegan members and they work hard at making sure the people of Montville are not negatively impacted by casino development. There is some negative impact, but I believe the benefits to the Town outweigh the negative.”

“I am against the town promoting development (casino). But I am not against them doing it themselves within their 600 acre boundary. As of today the Mohegan Tribe and casino has been very good for our town (unlike across the river).”

“I believe with proper planning and much consideration for the environment (ie. noise, light, traffic congestion) the casino, the community and the tourist can all co-exist and have a positive impact for all parties.”

One of the more negative responses includes:

“I don’t believe that the community (Towns people) really has any say in the casino development.”

Native American Tribe as Neighbors

There were several comments made about the Mohegan Tribe as being “good neighbors”. It appeared that the people making these statements felt somewhat lucky to be working with the Mohegan Tribe and appeared to have some sympathy for those working with the Foxwoods casino. This was interesting since there was no mention of Foxwoods anywhere on the survey; yet people still brought it up in comparison to their own issues. The following statements were made with respect to the Mohegan Tribe as “good neighbors”.

“Montville is fortunate to be dealing with the Mohegan Tribe, who have been very good neighbors. At least to this point, my sympathy is to Foxwoods neighbors.”

“Most people in Montville support Mohegan Sun. The Mohegan’s have lived and worked in Montville for centuries. Supporting Mohegan Sun is like supporting the community because the Mohegan’s give back. A new Tribe trying to build a casino would not be supported in the community because the trust would not be there.”

“The Mohegan Sun has not impacted Montville, like Foxwoods has Ledyard. In some ways, due to the Tribe’s long-term connection to the Town of Montville and their love for the area, they have actually provided enhancement.”

In contrast, non-native representations of the American Indian in the Foxwoods data showed much resentment as well as some guilt toward the Mashantucket Pequot tribe. The contrast is that the Mohegans have lived peacefully in the area for a long time, while the Pequots

were almost extinct but had had more of a turbulent and warlike history (D’Hauteserre and Carmichael, 2005).

Some of the Foxwoods responses are:

“They are a bunch of greedy people.”

“They don’t deserve money, They have not earned it.”

“I don’t believe they are real Indians”

“They don’t follow the rules. Why should they be here”

“I don’t like their high handed attitude about what is going on in the region.”

“I think there are a number of people with little Indian blood getting all the money.”

However, more positive representations included:

“They are getting back what they deserve.”

“They have already had such misfortune. They deserve better.”

One statement reflected the lack of control over space perceived by the residents surrounding Foxwoods: “They may have done a good job with the casino but it should have been done in someone else’s backyard.”

Tribal Sovereignty and Federal Recognition

There were a few comments related to sovereignty in the Mohegan Sun data. However, in contrast this was more of an issue in the Foxwoods data. The following are comments, one more extreme than the other, made in reference to this topic in the Mohegan Sun data:

“It is a scourge; a hoax hiding behind the twisted notion of tribal sovereignty; a racist loophole benefiting only those citizens demonstrating 1/16 Native American heritage (or more); a pandering malignancy, which creates obscene wealth on the backs of citizens with weak wills. The endorsement by the Federal Government of this activity seems blatantly out of step with the US constitution.”

“Casinos should be required to make public their annual profits and not just the “slot machine” profits, which is currently the case. Those profits should be subject to local, state and federal taxes...”

In the Foxwoods data, both positive and negative attitudes to the tribe were revealed.

“The tribe should not be a separate entity” and “They should pay taxes like everybody else” contrasted with “We pushed them down. They have as much right as others to make money” and “It is about time that they finally got something.”

Ethnic Diversity and Immigrant Workers

There were many comments made about the casino’s practice of hiring foreigners in the Mohegan Sun data, an issue that was not mentioned at all in the Foxwoods data. Many of the comments were directed towards people of Asian descent. Their comments ranged from an impact on housing education and traffic to comments about some of the workers lack of understanding of the English language. Overall, Montville residents seem to be suffering from an

‘Asian invasion’ that impinges on their idea of an attractive living space. Some of these comments hint at coping strategies of boundary maintenance (Dogan, 1989) and withdrawal (Ap and Crompton, 1993). The following positive comment was the exception: “Our town is much more diversified, racially now which is good in my opinion.” while, the majority of the comments are more negative:

“(The casino)...it’s brought hordes of low lifes including its employees...”

“Our neighborhoods are being inundated with Chinese who do not understand English and are walking our roads at all hours of the day and night because they don’t drive and have been recruited by the Casino to work here from Boston and New York.”

“...Casinos provide mostly low paying jobs, and many of these have gone to “outsiders” who have combined into groups to price many locals out of the housing market.”

“The casino has had a big negative impact on the community. The schools, the roads (traffic), the riffraff that have roamed into the area. Yes, I do work there but that is only for money. I will move out of the area as soon as my children get out of school. I am saddened by the change in my town. I am the minority in my own town and at work I don’t speak Chinese or Spanish so I am on my own in a foreign land.”

“My community is littered with Chinese and loads of other non-American people who can’t even speak our language and are crowding our area’s and piling in houses taking away potential landowners in Montville. Three quarters of the people working at Mohegan are illegal immigrants too! These people don’t live the law of the land or care for the law of the land. They should be legal and tried to speak English and become legal American and be truthful in filing taxes. Maybe the people like us wouldn’t care so much. How about you coming over here and trying to rent or buy a house in Montville area. Just try.”

“Biggest negative- Casinos (Mohegan Sun) hires Asians to work menial jobs- housing and transportation is an issue. It will be little time before a large loss of life and injury- major injury- accident or fire occurs.”

“The quality of casino employees coming in from literally all over the world is extremely poor. They are rude; they overcrowd nice homes and apartments claiming to be from one family- sleep in shifts with beds and mats on the floor. The tourists have been tolerable so far. The employees who are taking up residence here have brought down our quality of life.”

Immigrant Impacts on Traffic

Some of the issues concerning the Asian influx focus upon the impact on local traffic:

“Due to the influx of non-driving Asians, a dangerous situation has arisen. That is that they walk to work on narrow town roads (no sidewalks) and it is difficult to see them at night or dusk. A lady (Asian) was hit and killed while walking home from work (the casino) at 10:30 p.m.”

“I find it very unsafe for the Asians working there. They do not drive; therefore they walk, with dark clothing late at night to and from the casino. It is very very dangerous...”

“The casino has had a big negative impact on the community. The schools, the roads (traffic), the ruffraff that have roamed into the area.”

“The roads right now are terrible because they are widening them because of traffic. Hundreds of Asians have moved to Montville. Very few drive, most walk down Rt. 32 and cause serious traffic problems, prices of houses have gone up and they are building so many new stores and businesses.”

Immigrant Impacts on Education

Some comments are related to those about the issue of the Mohegan Sun hiring workers perceived not to understand or speak the English language. The impact on education was therefore the issue of their children attending local schools and the need for special education such as a second language (ESL). There were many comments made in reference to this issue. Some of these comments are as follows:

“Even though it provided jobs it is costing the town more as people move in. There is a great influx of Asians with children at school age. More teachers and tutors and interpreters need to be hired and there is starting to be overcrowding in the schools. More crime has surfaced. We were just fine before the casino.”

“School system is being over burden with oriental students needing language (Chinese) teachers.”

“Cost to the taxpayers has gone up. Because of non English speaking children of employees of the casino the town has been forced to hire teachers for these kids which don't come cheap...”

“We have not seen any impact money to offset increased costs to educate students and increased enrollment in our schools due to casino employees moving in our area.”

Environment & Rural Degradation

In the Mohegan Sun context, few comments were made about the actual environmental condition of the town as a result of the casino. Several other comments were made about the change in the atmosphere of what was once a very quiet rural setting to one that is visited by considerably more people and had several new developments as a result of the casino. This range of comments includes:

“The air now stinks.”

“Casino has no regard to environment or local people. They do what they want stripping land at will for no apparent reason. NOT a good neighbor! No buffer zones when they build.”

“Buildings are being built everywhere! We moved here to be out in the country.”

In contrast, in the Foxwoods context, changes to the environment are a major issue (Carmichael, 2000). Respondents make statements such as:

“They are destroying land and wildlife.”

“They are hurting the environment.”

“They do not care about their surroundings. They have no consideration for their neighbors, states or anybody.”

APPLICATION OF RESULTS

Many of these issues are directly related to changing power relations in the region and competition over space, especially in the annexation issue in the Foxwoods context. Within both casino contexts, issues were raised over control of the scale and pace of development in which the surrounding US residents had no control. Within the context of the Mohegan Sun, an unexpected issue was found in the extreme resentment against incomers of Asian origin that were attracted as workers or gamblers, relocating in the region and impacting traffic and overcrowding in schools. In addition, while comments about Foxwoods were not specifically asked for in the Mohegan Sun data such views and comparisons were volunteered by the residents. In the Foxwoods data there was no mention of immigrant workers but the concerns were more focused on sovereignty and legitimacy of the Mashantucket Pequots. Since Foxwoods was developed before the Mohegan Sun located only 20 miles away, it may be that Foxwoods absorbed most of the local supply of labor.

Several of the comments that the residents made in the two surveys were consistent with previous research on resident attitudes toward tourism and in which there are some good reviews (Ap and Crompton, 1993, Pearce et al. 1996, Haralambopoulos and Pizam, 1996). These items included such things as job creation, employment, recreational opportunities, development and planning issues, distance of resident to casino, crime, traffic and length of residence in the town, environmental issues and local participation in development decisions. Other types of concerns included: the casino facilities, the Mashantucket Pequot tribe or the Mohegan Tribe as neighbors, increased diversity in the town, tribal sovereignty and federal recognition, impacts on education, opinions about future developments, the immorality of gambling, some general comments and the idea that gambling is not tourism.

Crang (2004, p. 75) states that tourism is “an active agent in the creative destruction of places in what can be violent, contested, unequal, but sometimes welcomed, transformative and productive process”. He suggests that a destination is fashioned in different ways between different actors. This process is likely to unfold differently depending on local conditions and historical relationships. In the case of mega- resort development on Native American land, the actors are the developers (Indians), local community residents (US citizens and indigenous sovereign nations), gamblers (tourists or recreational visitors) and migrant workers attracted by casino employment. Such groups are in competition in terms of access to space and resources and are likely to hold different representations of the casino and how it affects their quality tourism experiences and quality of life. Hence, comprehending residents perceptions of the effect of tourism development is essential for sustaining mutually beneficial relationships between local residents and tourism businesses (Chen & Hsu, 2001, p. 460).

CONCLUSIONS

These cross sectional case studies highlight some of the major themes and implications of the development of native owned casinos from the resident perspective. Both studies show that the attitudes toward native owned casino development vary but that common themes do persist. Some of the variation in the findings may be related to the different historical relationships maintained by the Native American and white communities. Other emergent issues result from the casino developments themselves and the subsequent competition for resources.

This qualitative analysis indicated that resident attitudes toward casino developments vary but on some 'hot button' issues they tend to be polarized. Residents in both studies strongly voiced their concern about future casino developments and expansions in Connecticut. In the case of the Mohegan Sun Casino, residents appeared somewhat complacent about its initial construction but generally felt that they had little access to or control over the decision making process in relation to future expansions. While there was an overall sense that the Mohegan Sun casino has improved the economic situation in the region, residents were critical of the changes and impacts associated with its development and did not feel that they had specifically benefited. Residents perceived, however, that long term planning would facilitate the impacts associated with casino development. Residents would like more involvement in future planning and felt that the town can resolve and control many of the associated impacts with proper planning. In the case of Foxwoods casino, resident responses appeared to be mixed but also more negative than those of residents close to the Mohegan Sun. Foxwoods area residents were aware of economic benefits to their towns but critical of traffic congestion and of the Native American developers' rights to the land. They were threatened by the possible annexation of land to the Reservation and this proved to be a 'hot button' issue in their responses. Indeed attitudes toward the tribe in the case of Foxwoods area residents was much more negative, reflecting deep seated resentments and the more hostile relationships from the past.

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