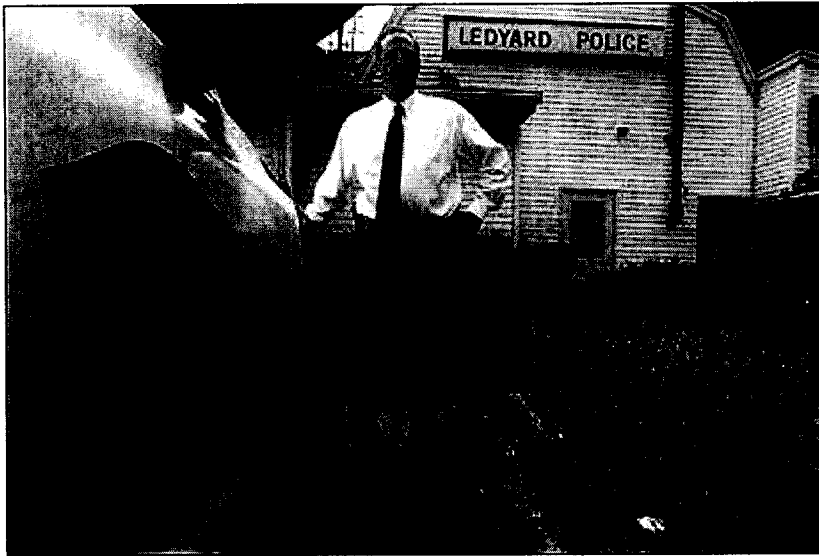


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Police Sergeant Michael T. Finkelstein works in Ledyard, Conn., near Foxwoods Resort Casino. Calls to police over the past six years have almost tripled. (Globe Staff Photo / Jonathan Wiggs)

Towns feel effect of Conn. casinos Traffic, crime on rise with more visitors, jobs

The Boston Globe

By Keith O'Brien, Globe Staff | July 22, 2007

NORWICH, Conn. -- Since casinos opened in two small, rural Connecticut towns in the 1990s, there has been a sharp increase in local traffic, police calls, and drunken driving arrests, according to a Globe analysis, and the changes have spilled over into neighboring towns as well.

Over the last six years, calls to the Ledyard Police Department, a short drive from the Foxwoods Resort Casino, have almost tripled, according to local authorities. And in Montville, where Mohegan Sun is located, calls to police are up 38 percent overall since 1997.

Arrests for drunken driving have risen in both towns -- up from 38 to 87 in Ledyard since 1991 and from 39 to 113 in Montville since 1997. But the big reason for the increase in police calls, according to both departments, is not casino-related vices, but the sheer volume of people passing through these towns every day, creating more opportunities for problems just by being there.

Traffic is up as much as 275 percent near the casinos -- a source of frustration for many residents. With the traffic, though, has come job growth. And with the job growth have come developers scooping up land and immigrant families seeking steady employment at the casinos as janitors, cooks, and dealers.

Together, these changes have altered life in Ledyard, population 15,215, and Montville, population 17,019 -- and in the surrounding region. Some say for the better, others for the worse. Either way, with two casinos rising into the sky just 10 miles apart, it is impossible not to notice.

"It's not as quiet as it used to be," said Mary Ann Maruzo, who lives in Norwich and works in Preston, a short drive from Foxwoods. "It used to be a real country town, Preston. Real country quiet. And with the casinos, there's a lot of traffic."

It could be a sign of things to come in Middleborough, the rural town 40 miles south of Boston where officials on Friday announced a multimillion-dollar agreement with the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe that could pave the way for the state's first casino. This agreement, which would pay the town \$11 million annually and about \$250

million for one-time infrastructure upgrades, will help Middleborough prepare for the changes to come. It calls for the Wampanoag tribe to, among other things, pay for the hiring of eight police officers and 16 emergency medical technicians. And the funding for such changes will position the town better than its Connecticut counterparts. Ledyard, where Foxwoods opened in February 1992, has no deal with the Mashantucket Pequot tribe while Montville, where Mohegan Sun opened in the neighborhood of Uncasville in October 1996, receives just \$500,000 a year.

* But even a lucrative deal will not help everyone. If the Connecticut experience offers any lessons for Massachusetts, it is that the ramifications of a casino will not end at the Middleborough town line. Rather, the ripples may be felt as far as Taunton and Bridgewater, Plymouth and Wareham -- towns that, unlike Middleborough, will not be getting a financial windfall.

The casinos "have changed things pretty dramatically anywhere within an hour's drive," said Chris Armentano, director of Problem Gaming Services, a division of the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. "It's not just the towns that are affected. It's the region."

The two Connecticut casinos say they attract, on average, a combined 70,000 people every day -- and the crowds have not been all bad. In the 15 years since the first casino opened, unemployment rates have plummeted. Roughly 27,000 jobs have been created in the region since 1992 for a job growth rate that is more than double the statewide figure. And in the early years, with Connecticut's submarine industry laying off locals by the thousand, the casinos saved many families, said Grace Horne, a former Mohegan Sun employee who helped hire people when the casino first opened.

"At first, people were looking for jobs that paid the type of wage they had been making in the past," said Horne, now an office manager in Groton, Conn. "But they realized those were not the jobs at the casino. And they were happy to have jobs at substantially less wages so they could have benefits and medical coverage for their families." ↑ ↑

Over time, immigrant families moved into the area seeking the same thing: steady work with benefits. Between 1990 and 2005, according to US Census data, the white population in New London County fell by 8 percent while the Asian population jumped 140 percent, the Hispanic population leapt 74 percent, and the population of those who consider themselves part of an unlisted ethnic group increased by 106 percent.

Suburban communities across New England have become more diverse in recent years. But without the casinos, local officials say their predominantly white county never would have attracted so many new faces. Some, like Andrii Metelskyi, a Ukrainian student working this summer as dining attendant at Mohegan Sun, stay only for a short time. Others, like Antonine Bernadeau, a Haitian immigrant working as a janitor at Foxwoods, stay for good. And there are so many workers that need English training that both casinos recently launched education programs.

The need, said Lisa Berry, is huge. Berry, Foxwoods' s director of organizational development and diversity, said the casino tested about 400 non native English speakers working as janitors this year and found that 280 of them hardly knew enough English to give their name and what department they worked in.

Classes began last month, and one day last week nine Foxwoods janitors -- five from China, two from Haiti, one from Peru, and one from Puerto Rico -- sat in a classroom at the Mashantucket Pequot Academy practicing job-specific English.

"Ask me for a stepladder," English teacher Deborah Brown prompted the students. "You can ask me 'May I . . .,' 'Could I . . .,' 'I need . . .'"

"I need a stepladder," replied Reimundo Colon, a Puerto Rican man who began working at Foxwoods four years ago.

"Please," Brown corrected him. "It's very important to say please."

While many have welcomed new arrivals like Colon, the influx of immigrants took many towns by surprise. *

Take Norwich, Conn., for example. It is about 3 miles north of Mohegan Sun and 8 miles west of Foxwoods. It has no casino. But this city of 36,721 people has become home to thousands of casino workers. By last year, nearly one-third of students attending Norwich public schools had parents working at the casinos, and many speak little or no English.

"I like to look at the schools right now and see how diverse they are," said Beth Brunet, the bilingual education coordinator for Norwich public schools, where last year's students spoke 24 languages. "It's very normal for Haitian students to sit next to Hispanic students and for them to have a conversation in whatever language."

But, Brunet admits, the diversity also poses challenges to educators. Some of the students, she said, are "barely literate." The school system has had to hire translation services to communicate with children and their parents and the Police Department has had to do the same.

Deputy Police Chief Warren Mocek said officers have worked crime scenes in recent years, handing a cell phone back and forth to an alleged victim so that a third party, on the phone, could translate. "It's the best we've got," he said. "But it's an unwieldy system."

* Norwich police have confronted many of the same issues as the casino towns down the road. Even with the population stagnant since 1990, police work has increased, according to statistics. Motor vehicle violations are up roughly 165 percent since 1992. Car accidents have risen 57 percent. Drunken driving arrests are up 17 percent. And, just like in Ledyard and Montville, calls for police service reporting anything from noise to theft have increased as well, up from an estimated 30,642 in 1992 to 53,974 in 2004 -- a 76 percent leap.

"I can't say casinos are bad things because of the benefits they bring," said Mocek, noting the job growth in the region. "The problem is, with every silver lining, there's a cloud."

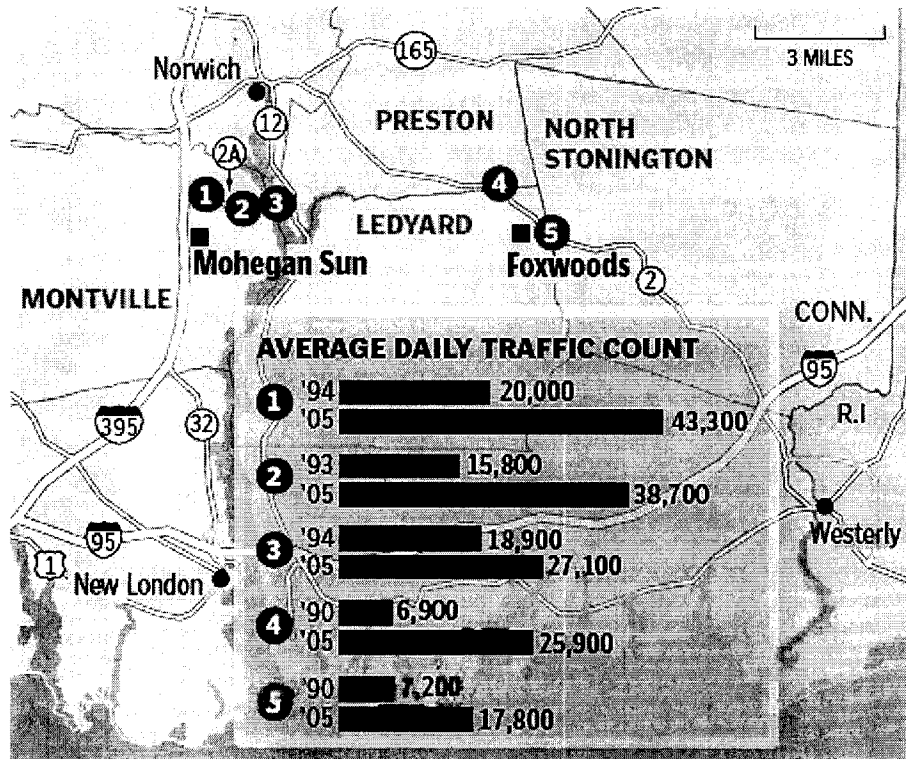
In the end, officials from both Connecticut tribes like to think the positives outweigh the negatives, that the new jobs have done more good than the increased traffic has done harm. But they admit that the casinos have changed the area. "Whether it's Mohegan Sun or a mall -- any sort of resort destination -- you have to be open-minded," said Chuck Bunnell, chief of staff for external and governmental affairs for the Mohegan tribe. "If you don't believe there's going to be any impact, I think you're being unrealistic."

In Massachusetts, the Wampanoags feel the same way, according to tribe spokesman Scott Ferson. In Middleborough, they hope to build a casino that will rival Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun. And with that, Ferson said, will come changes. "Presumably, when you're going to put in a destination resort of any kind you're going to have this experience with increased traffic, and 911 calls, and police calls," he said.

* The hope, he said, is that the tribe can offset these costs with a lucrative deal that will help the town prepare for the crowds and cover other financial obligations. But when asked by Middleborough residents whether the tribe can guarantee their rural town will not change, Ferson said there is only one honest reply.

"Of course, the answer is no." ■

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