

Sudbury Star Article – Jan. 4th 2017

When Eric Legendre was still a university student in his early 20s, he took up gambling. It started innocently enough, but soon he realized he had a problem.

“About 10 years ago I identified myself as a compulsive gambler,” the 36-year-old said Wednesday. “I was going to university. Poker was the big craze back then, about 15 years ago, so I just started getting into poker and playing with friends in university. Then I started playing online and going to casinos. I loved it, the thrill of it. Everything about it just drew me in. And then I started going by myself and I started spending more and more money.”

Legendre said he maxed out his credit cards and lines of credit, basically “any kind of credit I could get access to, I was using.” He was living in Ottawa at the time and could not even afford to pay his rent.

“I lost everything, including my girlfriend at the time, but thankfully I had a very supportive family,” he said. “Luckily my parents were there for me and helped me out.”

He also credits an in-house treatment program in Windsor, which he said turned his life around.

“When you’re in the throes of addiction you alienate everybody,” he said. “It’s a really lonely addiction. You’re on your own. All you see on TV and in the media is people having fun, but that’s a very small part of it. The people who really have the addiction are there at 2 p.m. on a Wednesday. Walk into a casino on a weekday afternoon – it’s probably one of the most depressing places you’ll ever see.”

He got clean a little more than five years ago and said Wednesday he has done a complete 180. He lost nearly \$100,000 to gambling, but these days he has a job, a fiancée, a child and he bought a home in the Valley last April.

“I was living a double life,” he said. “I had my regular life and then my secret life, when I was in the throes of a major gambling addiction.”

He also regularly attends Gamblers Anonymous meetings. There is one meeting in Sudbury, hosted at the Holy Redeemer church at 1887 Bancroft Dr. every Wednesday at 7 p.m.

Legendre’s story serves as a cautionary tale about how a simple pastime can spiral out of control. He believes it is best if Sudbury remains casino-free.

“The social dangers are just huge,” he said. “Bringing a casino this close to the city – seniors are especially susceptible because they have a lot of free time on their hands and a lot of them have a lot of disposable income.”

Ruby Lougheed Yawney, who founded the No Casino Sudbury group several years ago, helped organize a gathering Wednesday at St. Andrew’s Place. The town-hall forum brought together people opposed to the Kingsway casino, as well as those looking to learn more about the impacts of the casino to the community.

She said there is a lot of misunderstanding and mis-information circulating.

“There are economic perils, social perils, health perils, mental health perils – it basically is our government preying upon its most vulnerable citizens, creating more addicts and raising money from the people who can least afford to gamble this money, by promising them in advertising a dream that’s just not going to come true,” Lougheed Yawney said, quoting Warren Buffet.

Lougheed Yawney is hopeful that Sudburians can stop the Gateway casino from opening its doors on the Kingsway.

“Gateway casino is not the government, Gateway casinos is a public corporation that has a whole bunch of issues they’re dealing with and investigations they’re dealing with,” she said. “Who benefits from this casino? ... Human traffickers, because they get to launder their money, drug dealers, the underground economy. ... The underground economy is alive and well and casinos are needed to get that money into the system.”

Lougheed Yawney also said gambling contributes negatively to suicide rates, poverty and personal harm.

Tom Fortin, a vocal opponent of the casino, said at Wednesday's meeting there is no legal requirement for council to approve the Gateway project (or any other casino) in Sudbury.

On his website, casinofreesudbury.com, Fortin said the economic benefits just do not exist. In fact, more money will leave the community than funnels into it.

"According to city of Sudbury projections, the new casino will result in \$100-150 million in gambling losses with \$69-114 million leaving the community," he wrote. "With no significant external population base to draw from, the patrons in this casino will be 90 per cent locals, and the 10 per cent that are visitors will be people who were visiting Sudbury regardless of a casino. The difference is that they will be spending money in the casino complex and not in existing local businesses. Restaurants and charities will be particularly hard hit, but essentially, all local businesses will be (affected). Bottom line, this casino, enabled by our provincial government, and operated by a professional gambling company to maximize losses, will culturally and economically change Sudbury for the worse."

Gateway issued a statement late Wednesday night in response to Wednesday's meeting.

"Gateway Casinos is pleased and excited to be the new service provider delivering casino entertainment in Greater Sudbury. Through the OLG, Greater Sudbury has enjoyed casino entertainment now for almost 20 years and Gateway plans to build upon that experience with a brand new casino as part of a new sports and entertainment centre to be developed along the Kingsway," they said. "Gateway has planned a \$60 million investment that will create up to 250 new jobs in Greater Sudbury, in addition to the 140 jobs that already exist at Gateway Casinos Sudbury."

Gateway said they have been in the casino business for 25 years.

"We have been successful because of the unique entertainment experiences we offer our customers and how we work closely with the communities where we operate," they wrote. "While gaming is a part of our business, we focus on building local entertainment destinations that provide distinctive hospitality and food and beverage offerings – many that are family-friendly. Another important part to how Gateway operates is that we always strive to be a good neighbour and give back to the communities where we operate by sourcing goods and services locally and providing good paying jobs to our employees with opportunities for career advancement in areas like finance, IT, gaming operations, and food and beverage hospitality. Through GatewayGives, our charitable and community giving program, we are proud to support community projects selected by our local staff for local organizations because our employees know their community best."

They also said they offer gambling in a responsible manner "and highly regulated environment that allows adults to be social, enjoy a fun experience with friends or family" and they indicated the success of the slots in Chelmsford show there is an appetite locally for their brand of entertainment.