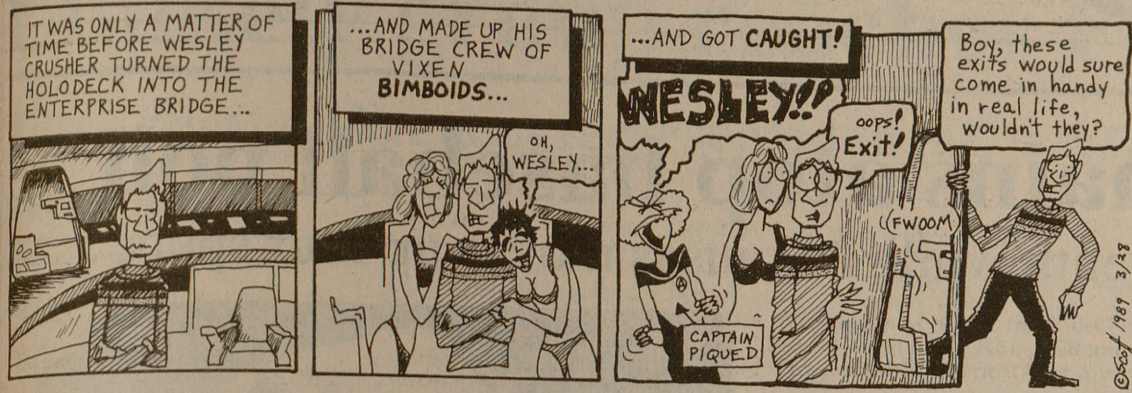


Warped

by Scott McCullar



Waldo

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Ohio could become country's third area to legalize casinos

LORAIN, Ohio (AP) — This city on Lake Erie is moving closer to becoming the third area in the country with legalized casino gambling, but residents still disagree whether a casino would be a blessing or a curse.

Lorain, an economically struggling and largely blue-collar city of 72,000 people, would have a referendum on the issue under the proposal the state House approved March 15.

"It would make more work and brighten this little town up," said Herman Ricks, 50, a 27-year employee at Ford Motor Co.'s Lorain Assembly Plant.

But Linda Hamilton, 32, a mother of two, said she may already start to fight against the proposal.

"I think it would hurt Lorain, and it would hurt Lorain families," said Hamilton. "I think crime would definitely go up."

The proposal, which has been pending for 14 months, faces an uncertain future in the state Senate, where hearings start next month. Gov. Richard Celeste won't say yet whether he would sign or veto the legislation.

House approval sparked a surge of opposition, including comments from Cleveland's top two elected officials that a casino might attract organized crime. An organization of Roman Catholic bishops in Ohio opposes any change in state law that could lead to development of a casino.

Ohio law allows charity bingo, horse racing and the state-run lottery, but casino gambling is legal only in the state of Nevada and in Atlantic City, N.J.

The originator of the proposal is Alan Spitzer, whose family operates more than 20 car dealerships in Ohio and Florida. Spitzer envisions building a \$400 million resort that will include a 1,000-room hotel, restaurants, shops and a casino on a former American Shipbuilding Co. property his family owns on the Black River, which meets Lake Erie at Lorain, 29 miles west of Cleveland.

The bill's sponsor, state Rep. Joseph Koziura, believes voters would approve the casino proposal.

Koziura, a Democrat from Lorain, bristles when he talks about opposition by Cleveland Mayor George Voinovich, a Republican, and Cleveland City Council President George Forbes, a Democrat.

"This is not a Republican or a Democratic bill," Koziura said. "This bill is simply an economic development tool that we feel we ought to have the right to vote on."

Many believe the project would be an economic boom to Lorain, which has struggled in the 1980s because of the loss of about 5,000 jobs at the USX plant, the elimination of approximately 2,000 jobs at Ford and the 1983 shutdown of American Shipbuilding, which at its peak employed 1,500.

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