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Bangor police deny casino group's crime logic

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS FILE PHOTO BY JOHN CLARKE RUSS

Denis Bailey, executive director of CasinosNO!, addresses the media while monitoring the state voting results for the Washington County racino referendum question in November 2007 at Lebel & Harriman LLP in Falmouth.

BANGOR, Maine — CasinosNO!, the group opposed to expanding gambling in Maine, has issued a press release stating that the city's crime rate has increased, and basically blames the increase on the operation of Maine's only gambling casino.

While statistics do show that the crime rate in Bangor has risen, Bangor Police Chief Ron Gastia denies that the increase is linked to the arrival of Hollywood Slots.

"It's an untruth," Gastia said Friday responding to the claims of CasinosNO! "It's just not true."

He and other city officials say CasinosNO! did not calculate other major factors into their equation, such as the downward spiraling economy, the city's three methadone clinics, the high number of registered sex offenders and homeless people in Bangor, and the fact that the city is a service hub.

"The people we're seeing committing these crimes, we firmly believe, are not the people going to the casino," Gastia said. "I don't know how anybody from CasinosNO! can draw that conclusion."

Bangor police "get very, very few calls" to respond to complaints at Hollywood Slots, he said.

City Manager Edward Barrett agrees with the police chief.

"We have seen very little crime associated with the casino," he said Wednesday. "We have seen some increases. We think a lot of that is related certainly with the economics, and the longstanding issue of being a service community."

"We attract individuals who are in need of economic, social and medical services," Barrett said. CasinosNO! has a different opinion.

"Since 2005 — the year that the state's only gambling casino opened in Bangor — crime in that city has increased 26 percent, while it has fallen in Maine's other two large cities — down 4 percent in Portland and 11.5 percent in Lewiston," the group's Web site states.

The Maine Department of Public Safety "Crimes in Maine" reports, which are posted on the agency's Web site, do show that Bangor's crime rate has increased nearly 26 percent since 2005.

But in 2008, the last year for which statistics are available, the crime rate rose only about 3 percent, to 65.07 per 1,000 population, up from 63.15 per 1,000 in 2007.

Barrett said that while any increase is undesirable, "It's not a dramatic increase. Hopefully, as the economy improves, we'll see it slack off."

In 2007, crimes in Bangor broke down into the following categories:

- 1 murder
- 4 rapes
- 24 robberies
- 17 aggravated assaults
- 208 burglaries
- 1,655 larcenies
- 42 motor vehicle thefts
- 3 arsons

In 2008 the breakdown was:

- 1 murder
- 4 rapes
- 21 robberies
- 25 aggravated assaults
- 255 burglaries
- 1,715 larcenies
- 48 motor vehicle thefts
- 7 arsons

The big increase for Bangor occurred between 2005 and 2006 when the rate jumped from 51.65 to 63.01 per 1,000 population. A temporary casino opened in Bangor in 2005, while Hollywood Slots, which opened one year ago, was being constructed.

But a second methadone clinic also opened in Bangor in 2005. The first opened in 2001 and the third in 2007.

Combined, the three clinics — The Acadia Hospital on Stillwater Avenue, Discovery House on Dowd Road and Metro Treatment Center on Hogan Road — have a capacity to serve 1,650 clients.

"We have three methadone clinics in the city," Gastia said, listing them as contributing factors to any increased

crime. "We have drugs in the city."

The police chief added that when the economy is bad, "we start seeing an increase in crime," mostly property crimes, such as theft.

Having more than 200 registered sex offenders and a high rate of homelessness in Bangor doesn't help either, he has said.

In a Bangor Daily News article about the one-year anniversary of Hollywood Slots opening that ran in July, Robert Welch, executive director of the Maine Gambling Control Board, said the Bangor Police Department averages between seven and 10 calls a month originating from the slots.

"WalMart would love to have a rate that low," Welch said in the article.

CasinosNO! released its latest attack on gambling in the wake of a new group preparing to gather signatures in a citizen's petition drive to win approval for a casino in western Maine. Black Bear Entertainment LLC hopes to collect 80,000 signatures before Feb. 1. That would be more than enough to ensure that the casino goes to a vote in November 2010, spokesman Peter Martin told The Associated Press last week.

"We are not suggesting a direct link between the operation of Hollywood Slots and Bangor's growing crime rate," Dennis Bailey, executive director of CasinosNO! said in the press release issued this week.

"All we are suggesting is that before the state considers more gambling casinos, it should conduct some in-depth analysis to find out why Bangor's crime rate is increasing.

"The increase is troubling," he said. "It's larger than in any other city in Maine and should certainly raise some questions about what's going on in Bangor." Overall, the state's crime rate increased only slightly in 2008, by 0.6 percent.

"We're fortunate to live in a state that has one of the lowest overall crime rates in the country," Bailey said, "and even Bangor's crime rate in the big scheme of things is pretty low. Nevertheless, the data tells us that we need better information and more study to find out why Bangor's crime rate is increasing while other cities are seeing a decline."

Gastia said if the city's casino were creating crime, he would know better than a group based in southern Maine.

"We are not making any connection" between the crime rate and the casino, he said. "It's not the opinion of the city or the Police Department."

BDN writers Kevin Miller and Eric Russell contributed to this report.