

Casino industry to broadcast a 'thank you' to Nevadans

By **LIZ BENSTON**
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Lest anyone forget that Nevada owes its economic growth to the casino industry, the Nevada Resort Association — the industry's lobbying arm — has launched a statewide radio and television ad campaign commemorating the 75th anniversary of the legalization of gambling in Nevada.

The generic "thank you" is also a reminder of the obvious — that a majority of Nevadans earn their paychecks as a direct or indirect result of gambling.

It's not entirely clear why a behind-the-scenes lobbying organization would fund feel-good advertising in a state that has ably protected its primary industry for decades.

Maybe it's got some time on its hands.

The association is hardly a marketing animal the likes of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, home to the \$80 million-plus advertising budget for its popular "What happens here, stays here" campaign.

In 2003 the association ran ads supporting a failed proposal that nongaming businesses should pay a gross receipts tax to help close Nevada's budget deficit. And every two years it compiles a fact book on how gambling taxes contribute to Nevada's economy.

The association is publicly shy, in part because its members don't always agree on issues — and are themselves powerful enough to individually exert influence on the legislative and political process with campaign contributions.

The industry is feeling mostly invincible these days. There's little fear that casino taxes will increase, and casinos mostly dodged a smoking ban that affects restaurants and bars that serve food.

Indeed, association president Bill Bible has entered the new year with little on his plate. Inevitably, some gaming legislation is bound to arise once the Legislature is in session, he said.

Rather than meddling with the industry's growth, such legislation is typically aimed at fur-

thering the trend. Last year, for example, the state allowed casinos to offer gambling in admission-only clubs and approved wireless gambling devices in casinos. It's anyone's guess what advances the industry will propose this year, Bible said.

There's a distant threat from two Democratic lawmakers to divert to local museums some of the room tax money that goes toward promoting Las Vegas. For now, however, all's quiet on the lobbying front — a good time for the industry to burnish its image in the minds of the public.

Other states generally view gambling as a vice to be taxed rather than an economic treasure, Bible said.

"Our constant economic and regulatory environment has permitted gaming to thrive here as it hasn't elsewhere," he said. "There have been a lot of bumps along the road that we haven't had here in Nevada. This (anniversary) is an important milestone."

Given that Las Vegas is witnessing its most expensive building boom in history, the

recognition might be long overdue.

The Las Vegas Strip has long touted the importance of nongaming attractions such as shows and nightclubs, with some luxury resorts reporting a higher percentage of nongaming revenue than gambling profit. Data from the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority show that gambling revenue has kept up with the exponential growth of money spent by tourists elsewhere in the casino. Last year, the \$9.7 billion that Clark County casinos won from gamblers was 26 percent of the estimated \$36.7 billion visitors spent in the county. That compares with gambling's 28 percent of total spending in 1995 and about 33 percent of spending in 1985.

For some companies, nongaming attractions are as important to bottom-line profits as slots, cards and dice. Gambling not only begets the industry's new revenue sources but in many cases generates the kind of stimulating, symbiotic relationship that allows shops and

shows near casino pits to thrive.

Bible, the former chairman of the Gaming Control Board, a former analyst with the Legislative Counsel Bureau and a state budget expert, knows all this. Though he shies away from the limelight and isn't fond of bold statements, he's still a believer in advertising.

The resort association ads, which Bible said are intended simply to nurture goodwill, are running on a variety of network and local cable channels and on radio stations.

Bible wouldn't disclose what the association spent on the campaign.

The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, which ran a few of its own 75th anniversary ads in November, spent about \$205,000 on a campaign that included a full-page ad in *The Wall Street Journal*, ads in the Las Vegas Convention Center, a commemorative coin, a booklet and bus wraps.

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