

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN IN LOUISIANA?

Thursday, May 12th, 2005
Wynn Las Vegas Hotel
Las Vegas, Nevada

I'm not a gambler. But I was lucky enough to be invited to Steve Wynn's grand opening of the \$2.7 billion towering, bronze-glassed hotel-casino, certain to bring a new era of architecture that will reshape Las Vegas. The biggest gambler in the casino was Wynn himself, who has staked everything he owns on what he feels will redefine what a large-scale luxury resort can be. And you want to know the sad thing about it? He proposed to do the same thing in downtown New Orleans. But nobody there wanted to listen to him.

Las Vegas' hottest new property has 2,700 rooms and 19 restaurants of which many have renowned, national chefs. And no dark, smoky casino can be found here. Light pours in throughout the building, giving you a sense of openness. Not like Louisiana casinos where you feel like you are in a cellar or a big warehouse. Trees, plants, and flowers – they are everywhere. More tulips than in the biggest garden I've ever seen in Holland. There are waterfalls coming down off of synthetic mountains, rising 150 feet in the desert.

Are you a golfer? The 7,000-yard course is adjacent to the hotel. That's right! The 18-hole golf course is located on the Las Vegas strip. You tee off from the first hole on the fourth floor of the hotel, and then the elevator takes you down to your cart. Waterfalls and replanted trees are everywhere. And in the next eight to ten years, the golf course will be developed into other retail properties. All that money for eight to ten years.

The rooms in the 50-story hotel have floor-to-ceiling glass and the elevators go all the way up to floor 60. But that's because the numbering system skips 40-49 altogether. Did you know that Chinese gamblers consider the number 4 unlucky? Wynn didn't miss a trick.

Nine thousand seven hundred employees work at the hotel. Some 110,000 people applied for jobs there.

Want to shop in high-class style? The shopping mall is a "Who's-Who" of exclusive boutiques. Chanel, Dior, Cartier and Brinoi – the list goes on and on. How about a Ferrari-Maserati dealership right in the hotel? It's almost like spending time in a museum. Actually, Wynn has his own museum featuring the artwork of the likes of Monet, Renoir, Picasso, Gauguin, van Gogh, and Manet for starters.

I list all of these features and amenities to point out what a visionary can do, starting off with the concept of gaming, but looking way beyond with a bigger vision of a host of choices that draws large and diverse crowds. To truly make a statement and draw the

huge flow of people that will be attracted to Wynn Las Vegas, there has to be more than gambling. Wynn hopes to shrink gambling income to less than 45 percent of the overall take at his hotels. If he could, he would remove it from his operations entirely.

“Don’t trust gambling,” he warns. “It’s an effect, not a cause. Follow the non-casino attractions and you’ll always see the winner.”

When the first casino was proposed in New Orleans back in the early 1990s, parochial thinking and major turf wars broke out. Those who envisioned creating the world of casino gambling with an anchor in New Orleans took the opposite approach used by Wynn. A casino and nothing else. No shops, no restaurants, no art galleries, no health spas. Gambling alone would draw tourists from all over the country and all over the world ... right? What a mistake?

Restaurateurs in New Orleans fought “tooth and nail” to keep any eating establishments from locating inside the casino itself. This short-sighted view of course markedly contrasts with what national retailers have learned all over America. People are drawn to locations where there is more competition and more choices. Just look at those who have found success.

Burger King wants to locate as close to McDonald’s as it possibly can. Car dealers cluster right next to one another. Get near your competition, and you will attract more customers. Even the same company brings different concepts side by side. In Baton Rouge the three newest and hottest restaurants (Fleming’s Steakhouse, Carrabba’s Italian Grill, and P.F. Chang’s) all come under the same corporate umbrella.

The point to be made is that a lot of non-gamblers flock to Wynn Las Vegas, and other multiplex gambling hotels. While some members of the family gamble, others are in the shops, spa, restaurants, and the art galleries. And the competition from other restaurants and related retail establishments are glad to be in close proximity. A major, successful restaurant owner in Las Vegas told me, “Heck, I wish Steve Wynn would open up 40 restaurants in his hotel. It just draws more people. His restaurants don’t hurt my business at all. The more the merrier, as we have a bigger reservoir of people to pull from. What New Orleans did was really a mistake in how the casino was blocked from bringing other options in.”

Have you ever noticed that most Louisiana associations hold their conventions in Biloxi, Gulf Shores, or Destin? The various insurance associations, Louisiana Bar Association, judges, sheriffs, pharmacists – you name it, they all go out of state. Why? “There aren’t any hotels that offer a variety of activities that you would want to bring your wife and family to enjoy. They have these options and amenities in Las Vegas. And they have them on the Gulf Coast. They just don’t have them in Louisiana,” one association director told me.

Steve Wynn was all over his hotel property this week. You saw him in the restaurants, the health spa, the shopping mall, and on the casino floor. He took notes on changes he

wanted to make, and barked out instructions to his assistant to “get it done yesterday.” But he did take a few minutes to muse about our part of the country.

“You know, I made the Gulf Coast what it is today when I built the Beau Revage in Biloxi. I brought it alive. I wanted to do the same thing in New Orleans.”

Too bad we didn’t give Wynn, and other visionaries like him, the chance. Think what it could have been like today.

I had a birthday this week. They brought me a wonderful birthday cake at the Bartolotta Ristorante de Mare in the Wynn Las Vegas Hotel, an elegant Italian restaurant that flies its seafood in daily. The cake was made with strawberries, lemon and cream. But there was only one candle on it. There just wasn’t enough room for 65.

I’ve hummed the Beatles’ tune for years: “Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m 64?” I’m past that now. But there is good news. When I went to the Art Gallery here in the hotel, I got my first senior citizen’s discount. Twenty percent off the ticket price. I saved \$3.00. When I get back to Baton Rouge, most of the drugstores will give me 20 percent off if I show up, I believe it’s on Wednesday.

And I am eligible for social security. That’s assuming all these proposed so-called “reforms” don’t reduce it down below the meager sum it is already. I’m revisiting the Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band gang, and revising their tune a bit. And I’m going to send this to all my congressmen.

*“When you get older, losing your hair
Will it still be ‘round?
Will you have a personal, private account
Or will you have some thing to worry about?
If you pay in, will it pay out
As long as I’m alive?
Will it still be there?
What’s your fair share
When you’re 65?”*

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

Jim Brown's weekly column appears each Thursday here at Politicsla.com, and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim's Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus read his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.

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