

## The Stakes in Atlantic City

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No one promised that legalized gambling would make Atlantic City a rose garden, but New Jersey might have aimed higher than a bad copy of Las Vegas. There are serious problems of relocating the poor and elderly, compounded by real-estate speculation and political hustling. Last on the list of public concerns is the kind of city the new gold rush will produce. Bad enough that there are no standards, oversight or review to control planning, design and construction. Worse still is an abdication of responsibility by state authorities whose job it is to hold the line.

A current example is offered by the Division of Marine Services of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. This agency has announced, in advance of a formal hearing today, that it will approve demolition of the rotunda of the landmark Blenheim Hotel. The demolition permit is sought by the Bally Corporation, the world's largest slot machine manufacturer, which plans a big new hotel and casino on the site. There would be a great deal wrong with a final decision to approve the Bally plan.

The state agency finding is based, cozily, on Bally's own economic feasibility study, but conflicts directly with the position of the Office of Historic Preservation in the same department. It wants to preserve

the Blenheim and other landmark hotels, an objective backed by Washington's National Register and by preservation groups. Indeed, Bally had already reached an informal agreement to maintain the Blenheim rotunda in exchange for permission to demolish two other landmark hotels. But this is a world in which agreements, and even laws, don't seem to mean much. Bally now offers "reparations" to the state for a demolition permit, on a name-your-own-price basis.

Beyond this intra-agency conflict lies a more serious problem of legality. A demolition permit for Bally would appear to violate the state's Coastal Zone Management law, which forbids demolition that adversely affects a natural or historic asset. The effect of dynamite on a landmark building is likely to be adverse.

The Casino Control Act, which outlines the basic development requirements, calls for "rehabilitation" of existing hotels as well as for new construction. In a curious interpretation of this law, Governor Byrne has repeatedly endorsed the bulldozer. The permit to demolish the Blenheim rotunda should not be issued. Beyond that, the most valuable outcome would be the state's establishment of sound preservation and development policies where none exist now. That is the only way not to gamble with Atlantic City's future.

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