

Book Review

Casino Gaming in Atlantic City: A Thirty Year Retrospective, 1978-2008

Brian J. Tyrrell, Ph.D., Editor

Israel Posner, Ph.D., Editor

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Reviewed by Betty McNeal

Casino Gaming in Atlantic City pays a well-deserved tribute to a small city determined to profit from legalized gambling with a noble purpose in mind.

Atlantic City, New Jersey, a legendary seaside resort fell on hard times and physically deteriorated. To restore this once proud town, leaders turned to casino gambling with a twist: the financial gains would go not to a general fund but to specific reinvestment projects to rescue the city. Such a lofty goal tied to a questionable industry like gaming!

Thus, Atlantic City became the first jurisdiction outside of Nevada to legalize casinos. With the bold aim of city revitalization in the bargain the leap must have seemed like pure folly. Did the heroics pay off?

According to *Casino Gaming in Atlantic City: A Thirty Year Retrospective, 1978-2008*, the outcome is largely a success story as the book paints a bright picture overall. While not skimping on the challenges it showcases the victories and lauds the efforts of a valiant experiment in the gaming business that can model for other jurisdictions in similar straits. On paper, the writers in this compilation did an excellent job of discussing, critiquing and evaluating the issues and the results. In the busy world of the city, substantial improvements were made and special-needs populations were served over three decades.

This book stands out for its organization, style and coverage. An executive summary starts things off by outlining the gist of each chapter with bullet points easy on the eyes and facilitating comprehension. An introduction follows highlighting the politics and economics of Atlantic City in the 1970s presaging a few setbacks that almost quashed the dream. Lessons were learned and the crusade for casinos marched on.

The main text centers around two sections each with its own theme. Section 1 looks at the social impacts of 30 years of gaming; Section 2 covers legal and economic impacts. Chapter 1 tackles head-on the contrast between divestment (withdrawal of resources) and reinvestment, the core requirement of the casino companies to help save Atlantic City. Chapter 2 discusses technology's role in streamlining and automating the games and the business operations; Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on gaming spillovers into the community in the work force, transportation, and crime, respectively. Chapter 6 addresses problem gambling and attempts to assist or treat afflicted players.

In Section 2, Chapter 7 investigates the landmark legislation, the New Jersey Casino Control Act, which has been characterized as thorough and unique. To quote chapter author, Nick Casiello, Jr., it was "thorough, in that it covers more areas and contains more requirements than any other gaming statute. Unique in that it contains many approaches to regulation that were new at the time. It remains both" (page 82). Besides establishing the typical gaming regulatory commission, licensing procedures and such, the act emphasized urban redevelopment imposing reinvestment obligations on casinos to give back to the community.

Chapter 8 talks about the money, detailing public finance, taxes paid, the tax burden and significance of the tax contribution. It describes several types of gaming-related taxes, lists the tax rates and the disposition of revenues. Chapter 9 covers employment and wages, demographic and economic trends, multiplier analysis and related economic factors. Chapter 10 offers suggestions for marketing and positioning Atlantic City for continued or greater success.

The epilogue quotes liberally from key players and stakeholders as they lay their best bets as to which way to go and what to do next to keep Atlantic City gaming at maximum or optimum levels.

Though space does not permit brief bios of the book's 16 contributors we will respectfully list their names, many well known, to publicize the caliber of thinkers responsible for this impressive volume. Included are a judge, attorneys, social workers, sociologists, economists and others that guarantee the value of the contents. The list includes Judge Steven P. Perskie, Michael Pollock, Jane Bokunewicz, Ellen Mutari, Deborah M. Figart, Anthony Marino, Lia Nower, Jamey J. Lister, Nick Casiello, Jr., David Listokin, Candice A. Valente, Oliver Cooke, Brian J. Tyrrell, Jeffrey Vasser, Israel Posner and Lewis Leitner.

Casino Gaming in Atlantic City: A Thirty Year Retrospective, 1978-2008 is more than regional economic history. It is an attractive souvenir with glossy paper, a dash of color and interesting photos, statistics and data blurbs to supplement the text. The profuse figures (charts, graphs and info boxes) total 142, each carefully documented so you can find the original source. A timeline up front tracks various events from the 1974 referendum seeking public accord to establish casinos to the 2007 start of construction of the newest casino, Revel. The table of contents is analytical and extensive; it makes up for the lack of an index. A reference list of research sources appears at the end.

This book is part excitement part cautionary tale. The recent downturn in the U.S. and world economies has sent gaming revenues plummeting. New Jersey lawmakers, regulators and Atlantic City leaders may have to go back to the drawing board.

This book suggests expanding the mix of gaming, entertainment, retail, leisure and tourist offerings to stay vibrant, profitable and competitive. Efforts to diversify are already underway and in the short run seem to be working. Hope floats that Atlantic City can reinvent itself as a dynamic, desirable, multi-purpose recreation resort and tourism business center not solely reliant on the health and growth of casinos.

Casino Gaming in Atlantic City: A Thirty Year Retrospective, 1978-2008 with its cover to cover collection of study material, analysis and authoritative discussion is highly recommended for a range of readers. Possible audiences include: gaming scholars and educators, problem gambling prevention and recovery agencies, gaming research institutes, states without corporate-owned casinos but now considering them, casino executives, managers and consultants, and community college, college, and university libraries.