

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor Rod Frank, Strathcona County, Alberta

FROM: Andreae Sennyah, Director of Policy, Cardus

CC: Councillors, Strathcona County
Mr. Darrell Reid, Chief Commissioner, Strathcona County
Mr. Gord Johnston, Associate Commissioner, Community Services Division

DATE: November 26, 2021

SUBJECT: POTENTIAL REPEAL OF THE CASINO BYLAW (BYLAW 100-2001)

WHO WE ARE

Cardus is a non-partisan, faith-based think tank and registered charity dedicated to promoting a flourishing society through independent research, robust public dialogue, and thought-provoking commentary. We are a leading voice on gambling and its impact on society. Our work has also been featured in the [Alberta Gaming Research Institute](#).

ISSUE

Strathcona County is contemplating a repeal of the Casino Bylaw that has been in place since 2001. Bylaw 100-2001 was triggered by a petition from residents who sought to prohibit casinos within the County. The [original bylaw text](#) cites the purpose of a municipality as per the *Municipal Government Act*. Namely, that a municipality's purpose is to, amongst other things, "develop and maintain safe and viable communities."

POSITION

Cardus [research](#) on gambling policy shows that a repeal of the Casino Bylaw would be contrary to this purpose for the following reasons: (1) gambling disproportionately burdens the poor; (2) particular types of electronic gambling are designed to be addictive, thus compounding their effects on the vulnerable; and (3) problem gambling has been linked to loneliness, isolation, and suicide.

WHO IS IMPACTED?

Our [analysis](#) estimates that the poorest households in Alberta spend more than 7% of their income (\$1,700/year) on gambling¹. Various studies from Canada and around the world consistently demonstrate higher levels of gambling amongst lower-income families. As noted in our study, the data clearly show that gambling disproportionately burdens the poor.

Our research also found that an estimated 1.5% to 3% of adults in Alberta suffer from problem gambling and that this minority accounts for roughly [50% of spending](#) on gambling in Alberta. Numerous studies show that

¹ Calculations based on AGLC Annual Reports and Statistics Canada, "Table 11-10-0223-01: Household Spending by Household Income Quintile, Canada, Regions and Provinces." For detailed calculation methodology, see Dijkema and Wolfert, *Pressing Its Luck*.

similar to other forms of addiction, problem gambling afflicts the more vulnerable including those with lower income, less formal education, ethnic minorities, and those suffering from mental illness and other forms of addiction.

The risk of problem gambling is heightened for people who use electronic gambling machines such as those commonly found in casinos. For example, machines may disguise losses as wins by using audio/visual effects to suggest a player has “won” less money than they bet. Notably, electronic gambling machines account for 76% of Alberta’s gambling revenue. By manipulating a player’s emotions and cognitive perceptions, these machines are designed to be addictive and further fuel problem gambling.

Our other [research](#) has found that those who suffer from problem gambling are also more likely to have attempted or contemplated suicide. Additional studies show that gambling can feed a vicious circle of loneliness and social isolation. People who gamble to escape feelings of loneliness have a higher likelihood of becoming problem gamblers, and problem gamblers in turn are more likely to experience loneliness.

RECOMMENDATION

The Strathcona County [2013-2030 Strategic Plan](#) outlines that the County is a place where “families thrive in [a] dynamic, caring and safe community.” Further, the first strategic goal of this plan is to “build strong communities to support the diverse needs of residents.” The County’s [Recreation and Culture Strategy](#) seeks cooperation between government, non-profits, and businesses to “contribute to the cohesion, vibrancy and overall well-being of [your] community.” Repealing the prohibition on casinos would be contrary to these goals.

Cardus research, backed by data from Statistics Canada and various empirical studies, shows that gambling as a whole, and certain casino games in particular, have negative impacts on the well-being of the vulnerable in our communities by fueling issues such as addiction, loneliness, and the associated tragedy of suicide.

The County [website](#) notes that “much has changed in [your] community over the last 20 years.” While true, the negative impacts of casinos on communities, and especially the vulnerable within them, has not. Our recommendation is for Strathcona County to continue prioritizing the well-being of your community by maintaining the current prohibition on casinos and continuing to focus its recreational efforts on centers that build, rather than break down, social cohesion in Strathcona County.

Read the Full Reports:

[Royally Flushed: Reforming Gambling to Work for, Not Against, Alberta](#) (Cardus, July 2020)

[Pressing Its Luck: How Ontario lottery and gaming can work for, not against, low income households](#) (Cardus, June 2020)