

PRELIMINARY REPORT

To the Governor's Commission on Expanded Gaming
March 16, 2010

My purpose today is to:

- Summarize how the community conversations were organized and implemented
- Share some initial impressions of the tone and substance of the conversations
- Describe the current on-line forum that complements the face-to-face conversations
- Describe our plans for the final, comprehensive report which is scheduled to be presented to you on April 20
- Talk to you about how you will use the results of WAS as you craft your report to Governor Lynch (and how our work and yours intersects with current legislative activity relative to expanded gaming)
- Answer any questions that you might have

There have been two primary goals for *What's At Stake*. First, we are responding to the Governor's Commission request to assist in gathering broad citizen input into the policy question of whether and how to expand legalized gambling in NH as a means of increasing state revenues. Second, we want to demonstrate a different way of soliciting such input, beyond the traditional forms of public hearings or public opinion polls (recognizing that both have an important role to play in the policy-making process). This second goal is concerned with demonstrating innovative methodologies for statewide public engagement through deliberative practices, an objective that could have national importance for other states considering contested policy matters.

Very few people have committed six or seven consecutive hours to intensive, facilitated deliberation in a way that would enhance civil, constructive, and informed citizen input. Initial comments from participants indicate that they both enjoyed and learned from the process, and would be willing to repeat the experience in the future to address other policy-relevant topics. In short, this project is an experiment in "doing democracy" differently

Our primary means of contact with potential participants was through the use of list serves, newsletters, and web sites of partner organizations throughout the state. These included but were not limited to the NH Humanities Council, the Business and Industry Association, the United Way, the NH Superintendents Association, the NH School Principals Association, regional planning commissions, the NH Center for Nonprofits, the NH Council of Churches, the Live Free or Die Alliance, and a host of other similar statewide organizations. In addition, press releases were sent to all media outlets. We estimate that around 15,000 NH citizens would have

received an e-mail from some source about the project and how to register. In the week before February 13, increased media interest led to multiple stories about the community conversations, as well as on-air radio interviews. A day before the conversations, we had 260 individuals registered to participate at 11 sites, ranging from 71 in Salem to 5 in Lebanon.

What Happened?

On February 13, we conducted 18 small group conversations (size ranging from 5 to 15) in 10 different locations, beginning at 8:30 and concluding around 3:30. Two days prior to the event, we asked the small number of registrants in Berlin if they would like to join the Littleton group, in order to have sufficient numbers to create a meaningful dialogue. All those who had registered agreed and did drive to Littleton to be a part of that region's event.

A significant number of those who had pre-registered did not attend on the 13th. This included as many as 30 of the 71 registrants in Salem and about half of those who had pre-registered in Manchester and Littleton. On the other hand, about 35 individuals who had not pre-registered walked in on Saturday morning, signed up, and participated throughout the day. Perhaps surprisingly given the long day that was involved, very few individuals left their small group conversations before the end of the day (7 in total). At the end of the day, we counted 197 participants at the 10 sites, meeting in 18 different small groups. In response to last minute interest in Berlin, we scheduled an additional day of conversation there, held on March 6. I facilitated a group of 24 people from Berlin and surrounding communities, representing a range of ages, length of residency in the North Country, occupations, and opinions.

All participants were asked to complete evaluation surveys at the end of the day, which included demographic information and questions about their opinions on gambling both at the beginning and end of the day, the degree to which their views might have changed during the day, and their overall assessment of the dialogue process that was used. Public Agenda, a nonprofit organization based in New York City that supports civic engagement with whom we contracted for the project evaluation, is now analyzing the surveys and conducting follow-up telephone interviews with a sample of the participants. We expect to receive Public Agenda's report later this spring, after we submit our final report to the Commission. In order to do as thorough an evaluation as possible, Public Agenda will want to see how the Commission uses our report and what impact it has on the Commission's final report to Governor Lynch.

What Did Participants Discuss?

A very preliminary review of the reports from the 19 groups that met on February 13 and March 6 shows that the topics and themes listed below were discussed at some length. This is only a preliminary, tentative review, and we have been careful not to frame these as "findings" or "recommendations" at this early stage. A more complete and conclusive analysis is ongoing, the

results of which will be described fully in the final report which we will present to the Commission on April 20.

Topics addressed with some frequency across most sites were:

- The state's need to raise new and additional revenues
- The impact on the state's quality of life if gambling were to be expanded
- The effect of new or expanded facilities on local and regional employment and income
- The impact on local and state taxes if gambling is expanded
- The nature of the jobs that might be created by expanded gambling
- The ways in which expanded gambling could benefit communities and the state
- The types of gambling that would be most acceptable, and those that are not
- The allocation of gambling revenues back to host communities to offset costs incurred by those communities
- The nature and extent of state regulation of gambling operations
- The need for more extensive and precise data about the impact of gambling in other states (especially changes in the incidence and type of crime)
- The criteria and considerations that the Governor's Commission should apply when it develops its final report to the Governor
- The influence of organized lobbyists and special interest groups on the policy making process
- The effect on charitable gaming if more gambling facilities are established
- The social costs of gambling, including compulsive behaviors, the effect on younger people, and the effect on local traffic patterns and congestion
- Questions about the timeline for decision-making, and the value of more extended deliberations to be sure that all available information and input are considered
- How NH's reputation as a tourist destination might be affected by expanded gambling
- The impact of gambling activity in other New England states, especially Massachusetts
- The role of "home rule" principles and local decision-making

Again, each of these themes will be addressed in our final report, with summary conclusions reflecting the aggregate of the small group deliberations. I think it is premature to try to characterize the overall "findings" of the groups today, as they will show a range of opinions about the risks and benefits of expanding gambling, with an accompanying range of caveats, qualifications, and cautions. What I can say is that there will be no "sound bites" that come out of this process. Because the process itself was not intended to produce "winners" and

“losers,” but richer, more complex understandings of citizens’ views, we have been careful not to proclaim a final result until we have carefully crafted a report for your consideration.

The On-line Forum

In order to extend the deliberative process beyond the one-day event, and to give more citizens a chance to participate, we have contracted with e-Democracy.org, a nonprofit, independent website based in Minneapolis. E-Democracy offers on-line forums for citizen organizations, providing technical support and creating a structure that is intended to foster civil, productive deliberation. To date, we have registered about 275 people on the NH Community Conversations home page, and approximately 100 posts have been entered since the site went live on February 25. It seems that about 25 percent of those who signed up for the on-line forum have participated at least once. The forum will remain open until the end of this week, at which time we will analyze the comments and exchanges and incorporate that material into our report to the Commission.

Plans for Reporting

At its meeting of April 20, we will make a more extensive and definitive presentation of our findings, and share any of the initial results of the Public Agenda evaluation survey, if those results are available. We will also submit our final written report to the Commission at that time. In addition, we will notify all participants in the face-to-face and on-line conversations of the availability of the report and post it on the What’s At Stake website.

How Will the Commission Use the Report?

We understand that the Commission has solicited information and input from a variety of sources. It is our hope and expectation that the views expressed by the 250 citizens who participated in the community conversations and on-line forum will serve as an important resource as you develop your findings for Governor Lynch. In each of the 11 cities where we held the conversations, we heard strongly expressed hopes that the voices of those who devoted a full day to the deliberations will be reflected in your report to the Governor. As noted above, the large majority of the participants believed this to be a worthwhile, productive process, but they also expressed skepticism that their voices would be fully considered. They are concerned that current legislative efforts will move ahead without the benefit of their ideas and opinions. They are concerned that purely economic criteria will override local and regional concerns for quality of life and traditional values of home rule and autonomy. Some felt that their past efforts to inform the state of their views, through local referenda for example, have been ignored. Some felt that their region has often not been well represented in the policy-making process in Concord.

The What’s At Stake project offers an opportunity to not only involve citizens in a different way of doing democracy, it offers an opportunity to show that policy-makers can be

responsive to citizens who have taken the time to become informed and to engage in a deliberative process. To the extent that your report to Governor Lynch references the range of views that emerged in this project, you will assure the skeptics and those who have felt that no one listens to them that their participation made a difference. We realize that for a topic as sensitive and consequential as this one, it will be impossible to produce a consensus that satisfies everyone. But if those who were involved in What's At Stake feel that they have been listened to, they are more likely to understand how and why you arrived at your findings. This in turn can lead to a broader base of support for legislative and executive actions that will follow.

B. Mallory on behalf of the What's At Stake project team
3/16/10