

August 15, 2011

Recently, the taxpayers of Nassau County unequivocally said NO to the Coliseum referendum, a proposal with more questions than answers. Too often we, the taxpayers and underwriters of these legislative follies, are left with jaws agape and wallets emptied when the details of these 'good ideas' are exposed. This week's principle from our 2007 Statement of Principles deals with the importance details and rules are for a fair race.

PLAY BY THE SAME RULES AND 'PONY UP' A FAIR SHARE

V. These facilities are NOT an island, but are an integral part of the communities in which they are located. They should be subject to the SAME rules as their neighbors, including zoning, employment, housing codes, regulations and police oversight. The facilities should therefore contribute their FAIR SHARE for the services and infrastructure their surrounding communities make available to the facilities. This includes amounts for police, fire and sanitation services, either through actual property taxes or a similar amount even if a tax exempt status is present. An iron-clad Payment In Lieu Of Taxes [PILOT] agreement guaranteeing such a revenue stream to surrounding local political subdivisions, including the central high school and elementary school districts, should be completed.

The potential of the Shinnecocks taking control over some, if not all, of the 435 acre Belmont Park property raises a host of concerns; especially the impact a federally recognized sovereign Indian Nation could have on the surrounding community. While the State of New York has had a great deal of control over what takes place at Aqueduct and Saratoga, NYRA's two other thoroughbred racing facilities, if it cedes control of any part of Belmont Park to the Shinnecocks, what takes place there could be beyond the control of the State of New York, and even, the federal government in some important respects.

The Town of Hempstead has had an important say over what takes place at the 77 acre Nassau Hub and Coliseum, as evidenced by Hempstead's dramatic downsizing of the proposed "Lighthouse Project" advocated by the owner of the New York Islanders. Whether the Town of Hempstead or even Nassau County could assert jurisdiction over property under control of the Shinnecocks is a serious concern. Whether the Shinnecocks, operating a hotel with hundreds of rooms supporting a full scale casino rivaling Foxwoods Casino, will have to play by the same set of rules that the New York Islanders have been since 1972, seems to be an issue of fairness for everyone impacted by whatever takes place at Belmont Park.

We all know the Shinnecocks have strongly resisted the State of New York's attempts to collect their fair share of our tobacco taxes. Wouldn't it be ironic if the State of New York now allows the Shinnecocks to open yet another outlet to sell tobacco products at Belmont Park! Will tobacco smoking, which is prohibited inside all our public buildings, now be allowed at the Shinnecocks gaming facilities at Belmont Park? What if one of their workers at Belmont Park gets lung cancer from being exposed to tobacco smoke in the Shinnecocks' facilities, will such a worker be allowed to sue or seek worker's compensation? The tobacco related issues alone illustrate the game changing nature of interjecting a sovereign Indian Nation like the Shinnecocks into the equation at Belmont Park.

We have discussed the potential strains on our local infrastructure and one way to relieve our concerns would be for payments to be made on behalf of the operations at Belmont Park that would represent their fair share of those services. We must not be subject to the changing winds in Albany to be sure that we receive our fair share of what takes place at Belmont Park. Our local school districts and our local taxpayers have already been shortchanged by Albany, and there is certainly no current iron clad agreements in place which assures us that Belmont Park begins contributing its fair share to our local communities as was done in the past. Why Belmont Park's horse owners and gambling interests should get paid first, while our school children and local taxpayers get taken care of last, is simply unfair. It must be the other way around, before anyone else tries to get their piece of the action at Belmont Park.