

Save the casinos

In a last ditch effort to save the casino industry, Movie Towne owner, Derek Chin, has submitted a report to the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, Conrad Enill, designed to counter what he calls the knee-jerk “emotional” backlash against the industry on the part of Prime Minister Patrick Manning, detailing ways in which the industry could be made to benefit the economy.

In August, one of his tenants, Golden Entertainment Members’ Club, in a major multi-million dollar development and expansion project at Movie Towne, intends to open a new gaming facility, but this has been placed in jeopardy by impending legislation, which threatens to ban slot machines – a critical money spinner in casinos. Before the license was granted, it triggered a slew of objections from the Association of Members’ Clubs (AMC) led by Ma Pau manager Brian Phillips. Their contention was that the new casino would be opening in an entertainment facility with “mainly children” as its patrons. Chin, in an interview, admits that the members’ club industry is plagued by serious problems: severe in-fighting and questionable practices, but says that the solution to all of this is to regulate the industry and to make it an economically viable part of the burgeoning tourism sector. Chin said that the report, which was submitted to Enill, on Enill’s request, over two weeks ago, makes several recommendations designed to make the gaming industry “a real, full-fledged one”. “My discussions with the Minister are to start the regulations of the gaming industry properly so that the gaming industry in Trinidad and Tobago could make a proper contribution to the Trinidad and Tobago economy,” he said.

Cleaning House: Regulation

Chin called the situation with members’ clubs in Trinidad and Tobago “a farce,” because members’ clubs are not really

operating as members' clubs but, in fact, are casinos masquerading as members' clubs.

Under current law, casinos are not legal. But members' clubs (defined as clubs not operating for gain under the Registration of Clubs Act) are.

"The problem is the fact that the whole members' club position in Trinidad is a farce and the government needs to take a position that preserves the industry, but it must be properly regulated," he said.

He admitted that the tenant that wants to open a casino at Movie Towne – the Princess Group – had to sublet to a members' club called Golden Entertainment for the purpose of acquiring its members' clubs licence because of the way current laws are structured.

According to Chin, the gaming industry has been beset by severe in-fighting in the face of repeated threats to shut the industry down. Despite attempts by Brian Phillips, the President of the Association of Members' Clubs, who also met with Enill over the issue of regularisation, the legislation has been introduced in the House of Representatives. Phillips had unsuccessfully tried to come together with Princess Group in talks designed at regulating the industry.

"Instead of coming together to work as a proper front to deal with this situation they are fighting each other for greed. It's all greed. They want to control the market," Chin said. As such, he believes that there is a critical need for true regulation of the industry.

"You can't regulate yourselves; you have to have a government authority to regulate you."

At the same time, however, Chin is cautioning Government to look at the situation from an economic and not an emotional perspective and calling on Manning to change his approach to

the issue of banning slot machines.

“It’s a very short-sighted emotional decision being made by the Prime Minister and his Cabinet. They need to look at it a little more differently,” he said.

“The Prime Minister has his own view...Based on morality, he’s saying that gambling affects home life and family life... it has to do with morals... But you cannot legislate morality.” “Government cannot tell you where you want to spend your free time,” Chin argues.

He believes that Trinidad should not lag behind other Caribbean countries like Aruba, St Maarten, the Dominican Republic, Panama and Jamaica, which have made their local gaming industry a key part of their tourism package.

“Don’t take an industry because you have some issues with morality and ban it because that defeats the purpose. You have the employment situation, you have the tourism attraction, you have the investment in the country, because you have it poorly regulated you are having the problems,” Chin said.

“My position is you don’t remove the second biggest industry in the world because of issues with morality. You take it and set it up and you organise it properly, so that it can make a proper contribution to the society in which we live in instead of just removing it. We can make it work.”

Legislation banning slot machines was passed in the House of Representatives on June 18.