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Ministers rally to defeat casino

BY JOE RODRIGUEZ
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Four African-American pastors urged Sedgwick County residents to vote against a local casino, saying it would be bad for the community and especially harmful to African-American and Hispanic families.

In a news conference Monday outside Century II, the pastors said the rate of gambling pathology among African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans was seven to eight times the rate among white Americans in a 2001 study conducted by the University of Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions.

"We have a choice to stop something that is going to hurt those who can least afford for this to be in our community," said Pastor Bryan Mann of New Beginnings Seventh-day Adventist Church and president of the Wichita Ministerial Alliance, which is predominantly African-American.

"We have an obligation to stand up, to speak out and to stop something from coming in our backyard."

Other religious leaders who spoke at the news conference were the Rev. Peggy Elliott, director of The Balm of Gilead Ministries; the Rev. Titus James Sr., pastor of North Heights Christian Church; and Pastor Towanda Hardwell of Second Chance Church Outreach.

They said they represented African-American pastors opposed to casinos and the sale of liquor on Sundays. The Wichita City Council approved Sunday liquor sales in late April, but a petition drive to force a citywide vote on the issue is ongoing.

The pastors spent most of their time sharing their concerns about a casino. Sedgwick County residents will vote Aug. 7 on whether to allow one in the county.

"Many African-Americans believe casinos will bring them abundant life. That's a lie," Elliott said. "First of all, as the body of Christ, we don't believe in luck. We

believe in blessings. And (a casino) is not a way up and a way out of poverty, it is not a way to get extra cash to pay bills. That's not the truth. We will lose more than we would ever gain."

Elliott said she was particularly disturbed that 2 percent of the local casino revenue would be used to fund addiction treatment.

"Hello, that's like saying 'I'm going to do something that's going to hurt you, but I've got some money to send you to the doctor,' " she said.

Other pastors said that people would be better served by giving to churches and other places that serve people in need, rather than giving their money to casinos.

"If you put a dollar in the (collection) plate and a dollar in the slot machine, I believe that you ought to have more faith in God that he will bless that (collection plate) dollar more," Mann said.

Elliott said she is not discouraged that early polls have shown Sedgwick County voters strongly favor a local casino.

"I believe prayer changes things," she said.

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