



## Casinos bring jobs - and a strain on schools - to ailing Norwich

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July 23, 2007 2:00 AM

NORWICH, Conn. — In the early 1990s at the end of the Cold War, high-paying defense manufacturing jobs vanished as businesses left the area. Homes and storefronts were abandoned. This small city set on the banks of the Thames River started to crumble.

Today, however, a bustling downtown showcases the new atmosphere of economic brawn in this southeastern Connecticut community. Businesses have opened and there is no shortage of jobs.

Once again, there is life in Norwich.

Residents and city officials credit the turnaround to the nearby Foxwoods Resort and Casino and Mohegan Sun.

"It has been a godsend," Mayor Benjamin Lathrop said.

But the revitalization has not come without problems. And not all Norwich residents are happy about the changes.

Though Norwich does not host either of the two Indian-owned casinos, the city of 37,000 has experienced an enormous impact from them.

More than 20,000 people work at the casinos, many on wages that can pay for housing only in the "affordable" range. Of the five towns surrounding the casinos, Norwich rents are the least expensive.

Even at that, "hot-bunking" has been an issue, as several tenants squeeze into crowded homes to save money.

Thousands of immigrants were lured to the area to work in the casinos.

The explosion in new residents has brought several different cultures and foreign languages to the area.

Instead of balking at the prospect of these new residents, the city capitalized on it, the mayor said.

Businesses popped up to capture the discretionary income of casino workers, Lathrop said. Many cater to the large Asian population.

And in the schools, resources were shifted to deal with the mushrooming number of non-English-speaking children of casino workers.

Ten percent of Norwich Public School District students — 400 in total — participate in English language programs. That's up from 100 students six years ago, said program coordinator Beth Brunet.

"The rate that it changes is the bigger factor," she said. "It's not about who and why people are coming, it's about how fast."

The students in Dawn Davis' lab at the Moriarty School speak Cape Verdean Creole, Haitian Creole, Chinese and Tibetan. She speaks Haitian Creole herself.

The walls are lined with pictures and corresponding words, like a kindergarten classroom. The days of the week are posted in English and Chinese. Even signs in the library are written in English, Spanish and French.

While the district has adapted, keeping up with national education standards has been difficult.

Because of the No Child Left Behind laws, Norwich has been labeled a district in need, said Joseph Stefon, curriculum director. The testing requirements are not fair for non-English speakers, he said.

And the Norwich schools are educating not only children, but adults as well, putting an additional financial strain on the school budget.

Half the students who study at an adult education center are there to learn the English language and American customs.

Of those 600 students, 480 work at the casinos.

School officials weren't prepared for this rapid influx of non-English speakers.

"It just happened and we had to meet that demand quickly," said teacher Joanne Semmelrock.

Despite the cost, however, some say the diversity has been good for the city.

"One of the very good things is we've had an influx of all kinds of nationalities and people," said Robert Hall, an Episcopal clergyman at a local church. "It's become a very cosmopolitan town."

Still, some residents say the changes have not benefited the town.

Norwich receives no direct financial assistance from either tribe and get only about \$2 million from the state's Pequot/Mohegan Fund. Connecticut last year pulled in about \$427.5 million from the tribes, representing 25 percent of slot machine profits, but the state sent only about \$84 million back to cities and towns across the state.

In fact, the Pequot tribe is spending \$70 million of its own money to repair Route 2, said Michael Thomas, tribal council chairman.

"The roads are terrible, the school systems are overloaded," said Linda Orლოსki, a seven-year resident. "There's no draw to come to Norwich."

"Before, the people were more friendly and everything else, everybody got along," said Annette Bettencourt, a lifelong resident. "It's just not a good situation."

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## NORWICH: RECENT CHANGE

**SCHOOLS:** In the past six years, the number of non-English-speaking students in public schools has quadrupled, from 100 to 400.

**NEW EMPLOYERS:** More than 20,000 people work at Foxwoods Resort and Casino and Mohegan Sun; many of them live in nearby towns. Immigrants make up a large portion of the casino work force.

**HOUSING:** The affordable-housing stock stands at 22 percent. As casino workers and their families have settled in Norwich, a city hard hit by the loss of manufacturing jobs has been revitalized.

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