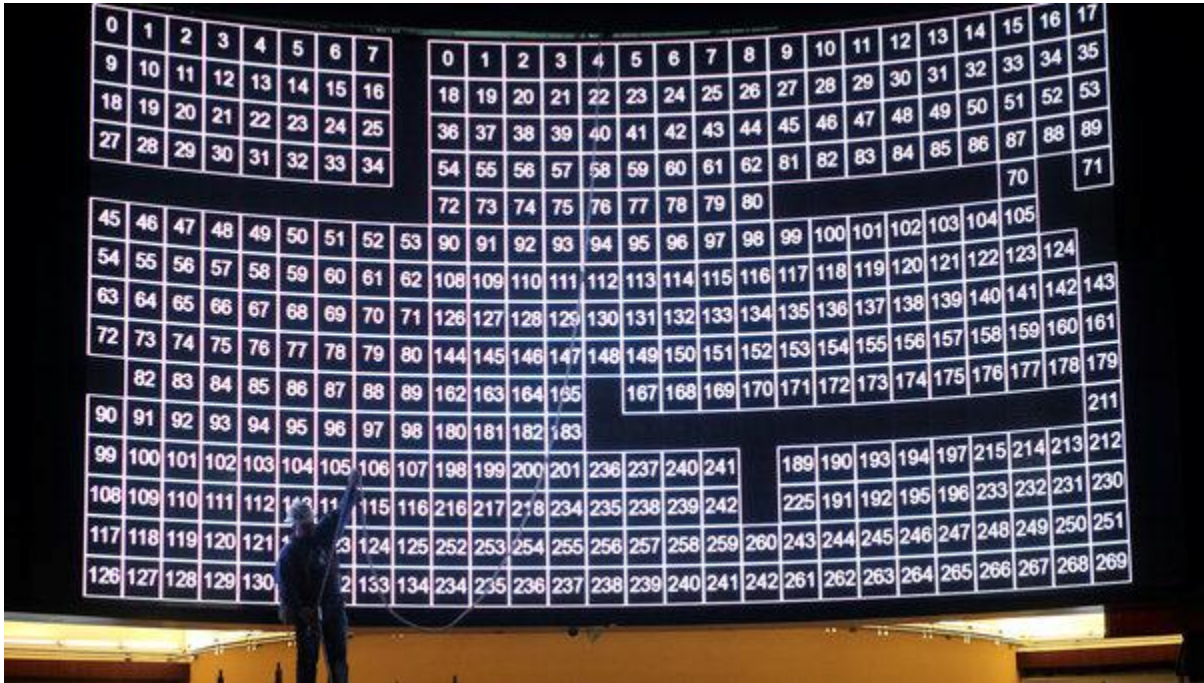


# Experiencing Las Vegas, in Queens



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Workers prepare gambling machines at Resorts World Casino New York City by the Aqueduct racetrack in Queens; the casino is scheduled to open on Friday.

By [DAN BILEFSKY](#)

New York Times

The new [Resorts World casino](#) opening Friday, with its flashing multicolored ceiling lights, electronic baccarat tables presided over by robotic dealers and a fake twinkling night sky created from satellite images of the sky over 42nd Street, seeks to offer a Las Vegas interpretation of Times Square.



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

The new casino has 5,000 video terminals and electronic table games, but, in accordance with the law, no human dealers.

But the casino's main innovation is that it is reachable by subway from the real Times Square.

It is New York City's first casino — or racino, because it is connected to the Aqueduct racetrack in South Ozone Park, Queens — featuring 5,000 video gambling terminals and electronic table games, including craps and a popular Asian dice game known as sic bo; restaurants like Chinese dim sum and the Stage Deli; and 6,500 parking spots.

The casino, which was approved by the Legislature in 2001 only to be delayed by false starts and influence peddling, has already stirred deep divisions. Some critics say it comes perilously close to breaching constitutional limits on gambling, while others predict it will prompt a deluge of social ills, like divorce, gambling addiction or suicide.

But supporters, including the owners of the casino and legislators in Albany, say that casino gambling has been available in the metropolitan area for years, and that this casino will help keep jobs and some of that revenue in New York.

“This is an opportunity for New Yorkers to have a Vegas-like experience without having to leave the city,” said Michael Speller, the president of Resorts World Casino New York City, who started off as a blackjack dealer in his native London when he was 18.

Resorts World, owned by Genting New York, a subsidiary of the largest gambling company in England and Southeast Asia, says the casino will generate up to \$1.5 million a day for the state. Also in the works are a climate-controlled bridge to the nearby Aqueduct North Conduit Avenue A train subway station and a shuttle to Kennedy International Airport.

The doors will open at 1 p.m. on Friday, and at 8 a.m. beginning Saturday. Closing time is 4 a.m. seven days a week.

Only the ground-floor portion of the complex, called the Times Square Casino, will be open on Friday. The more elegant Fifth Avenue Casino, which will open on the second floor in December, will feature the upmarket RW Prime Steakhouse, fine Chinese cuisine and an expansive outdoor terrace where diners can overlook the track where Secretariat was paraded shortly before his retirement and where Pope John Paul II said Mass in front of 75,000 people.

Another portion of the second floor is set aside for the Crockfords Casino, named after the upscale London casino also owned by Genting, designed for high-rollers and would-be Donald Trumps who will have access through a private entrance, after being delivered to Aqueduct in Champagne-stocked limousines.

The third floor, called Central Park, will have 130,000 square feet, making it the largest event space in Queens and a place for newlyweds craving a casino reception.

In recent weeks, 1,400 construction workers have been working 20 hours a day in two shifts to ensure that the casino will be ready by Friday. One week ago, the front sign said, "RESORTS WORLD ASINO NEW Y K CITY," but the missing letters were in place by Monday.

New York authorized gambling at Aqueduct and eight other racetracks in 2001, after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center shook the state's economy. But while the other tracks were able to install video slot machines, which now generate more than \$600 million a year in revenue sharing for the state, deals for Aqueduct, considered the most profitable franchise, fell through. Last year, the state inspector general found that State Senate leaders had manipulated the process to favor a politically connected group from Queens.

After another round of bids, Genting won by offering the state a \$380 million upfront fee, which it has paid.

The casino imitates the glitz and frenzy of Caesars Palace or Bally's without running afoul of state laws and regulations that allow electronic gambling, but not human dealers, at the tracks. The baccarat tables feature real cards shuffled and dealt by robotlike mechanical arms.

"We have a situation in which elected state officials are breaching the Constitution," said the Rev. Jason McGuire, executive director of [New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms](#), a conservative Christian political group. "A robotic arm dealing cards is just as insidious as a human being."

Dr. Michael Bernstein, a psychiatrist at the New Horizon Counseling Center, which sits across from Aqueduct, said he feared the economic benefits would be offset by social problems, and noted his concern that neighborhood high school students could play truant from school in order to gamble (the minimum age to gamble is 18). "Gambling caters to the lowest element of the human soul," he said. "It is like a regressive tax, it is extremely addictive and poor people will be disproportionately affected."

But Howard Shaffer, an associate professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School who specializes in addiction, said that since the 1970s, the percentage of pathological gamblers in the United States had remained flat at under 1 percent, despite the huge national explosion in gambling.

"We should be concerned and vigilant," Professor Shaffer said. "However, there is very little scientific evidence suggesting that gambling by itself is the primary source of depression, suicide, bankruptcy or crime, though it can be a contributing factor."

The casino has generated far less local opposition than, say, the efforts by Wal-Mart to open a store in the city. And now a fierce lobbying effort is under way by the racinos to let them expand into full-fledged casinos with more lucrative table games and human dealers. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has indicated that he might be receptive to legalizing non-Indian casinos — New York State has five Indian casinos — and a September poll by Quinnipiac University showed that 56 percent of state voters supported the idea of allowing Las Vegas-style casinos in New York.

In South Ozone Park, a sleepy middle-class neighborhood peppered by white bungalows, karate studios and garden centers, some residents say they hope the casino will restore the fortunes of the 117-year-old racetrack, which once hosted champions like Cigar and Secretariat but in recent years has declined.

This week, clutches of immigrant workers have descended on Aqueduct looking for jobs. Kathleen Lackhansingh, 66, a former office assistant, said Monday that she hoped the casino would provide her with extra income, as well as a more convenient place to play craps.

“It is good for the economy, and I am excited because I hate having to go to Atlantic City because of the commute,” she said.

But Enzo Bellissimo, whose car repair shop has been across the street from the Aqueduct for 39 years, predicted the casino would prove a disaster. He said he planned to close his shop on Friday to avoid the crowds.

“It is going to create a big mess,” Mr. Bellissimo said. “Prostitutes. Crime. Gamblers are not going to create new business for us. I don’t want this garbage.”