

GEOFF SCHUMACHER:

Goodman's brothel views aren't irresponsible

Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman is taking some shots for once again suggesting that perhaps legal brothels should be allowed in Las Vegas.

For those local politicians who despise Goodman -- including Las Vegas Sun columnist Jon Ralston and former Mayor Jan Jones -- this kind of comment presents a wonderful opportunity to start firing.

After all, from the conventional political perspective, Goodman proves he's a loose cannon unfit for public office by suggesting such a crazy notion. Where are his morals? Where's his sense of decency?

But I have a feeling that on this issue, Goodman has a better handle on the prevailing public sentiment. He understands a little better than his critics what the majority mind-set is in Nevada.

When you live here -- and especially if you grew up in brothel-rich Pahrump, as I did -- you often are asked to declare a position on prostitution. I have agonized over this for years. I've gone back and forth, never settling comfortably on either side of the issue.

On the one hand, I fully realize the world's oldest profession will always be with us, and so, if it's going to happen, why not make it as safe and free of corruption as possible through regulation?

On the other hand, I know that many prostitutes have lived deeply troubled lives of childhood molestation, physical and mental trauma, and drug and alcohol abuse. Pimps make their lives miserable and profit from their pain. Some customers become vicious and violent. None of these women looked up at their parents when they were kids and said, "Mom and Dad, I want to be a hooker when I grow up." Many of them were coerced into prostitution or got into it out of desperation.

Knowing this, I find it difficult to support government sanction of an industry that exploits the misfortunes of these women and encourages them to continue in the trade.

Of course, the world of legal prostitution is not so black and white. For example, there is the question of the woman's right to make a living in the manner she chooses. If she genuinely wants to sell sex, if she has not been forced to participate in this activity, should the law stand in her way?

Probably not. After all, while prostitution certainly is a risky and at least occasionally unpleasant way to earn money, there are plenty of "regular" jobs out there that pay a lot less and come with their fair share of risks and hardships.

Kate Hausbeck, a UNLV sociology professor who has studied prostitution, says it is condescending to decide that we know what's best for women who engage in prostitution of their own free will. "It's frankly dismissive of women as uninformed, silly children, which is exactly the perspective we should have moved far beyond," she told the Review-Journal last week.

She makes an important point. The historical reality is that prostitution is prohibited in 49 states and Nevada's major urban centers primarily because of strong religious and Victorian moral views dating to the 19th century and before. Our predominantly Christian, patriarchal society decided what was best for women, who at that time weren't allowed to vote or work in many trades and professions.

Have we not moved beyond the Victorian Age?

There are many aspects of illegal prostitution that are reprehensible and blatantly criminal. Forcing women into prostitution -- essentially slavery -- must be prosecuted aggressively. If Las Vegas has become a haven for human trafficking, as it appears to be, then authorities need to crack down hard on offenders.

But legal brothels are another matter. They are, in my view, a step toward civilizing an inherently nasty business. And while I know that many of the prostitutes endure deep psychological scars that led them into the profession, I also know that a legal brothel is a far better place for them to ply their trade than East Fremont Street or West Tropicana Avenue.

Lori Shaner worked as a madam at the Sheri's Ranch brothel in Pahrump and wrote an excellent book about her experiences. In *Madam*, she provides a detailed picture of how the brothel business works and paints vivid portraits of the women who work there. She sums up the prostitutes this way:

"At the beginning, I believed that women who worked as prostitutes were different from the rest of us, that they had some incomprehensible belief system that permitted them to cross a line into a netherworld the rest of society could never understand. I was wrong. They are exactly like the rest of us -- human. These women are not understood because they remain cloaked in mystery, subject to prejudice born of ignorance."

As for Mayor Goodman's dream of shiny brothels operating freely in Las Vegas, it's not likely to happen anytime soon. It's almost impossible to imagine today's state Legislature voting to relax the law to allow brothels in Las Vegas and Reno. The political fallout would be far too great.

Instead, we'll continue to have hundreds of illegal hookers walking our streets and hanging out in our casinos. Many of them will work for mean, controlling, greedy pimps, while others will put themselves at risk of contracting -- and passing on -- deadly diseases. And local police will dedicate millions of dollars in taxpayer-paid resources to bust prostitutes and their customers, yet the oldest profession will continue to thrive in the dangerous shadows of legitimacy.

Of this I am certain: Prostitution is a lot uglier business in Las Vegas than it is in Pahrump.

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Published September 9, 2007

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