

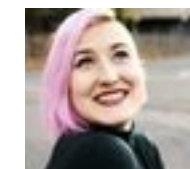
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Atlantic City takeover threat reopens residents' old wounds

By WAYNE PARRY OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS | APR 18, 2016 AT 7:55 PM



ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. — Since long before the first casino went up, there has been a strong feeling of being left out and left behind among the mostly minority population of this seaside gambling resort.

The riches from the billion-dollar gambling palaces largely never trickled down to neighborhoods, and state agencies crept deeper into the city's business.

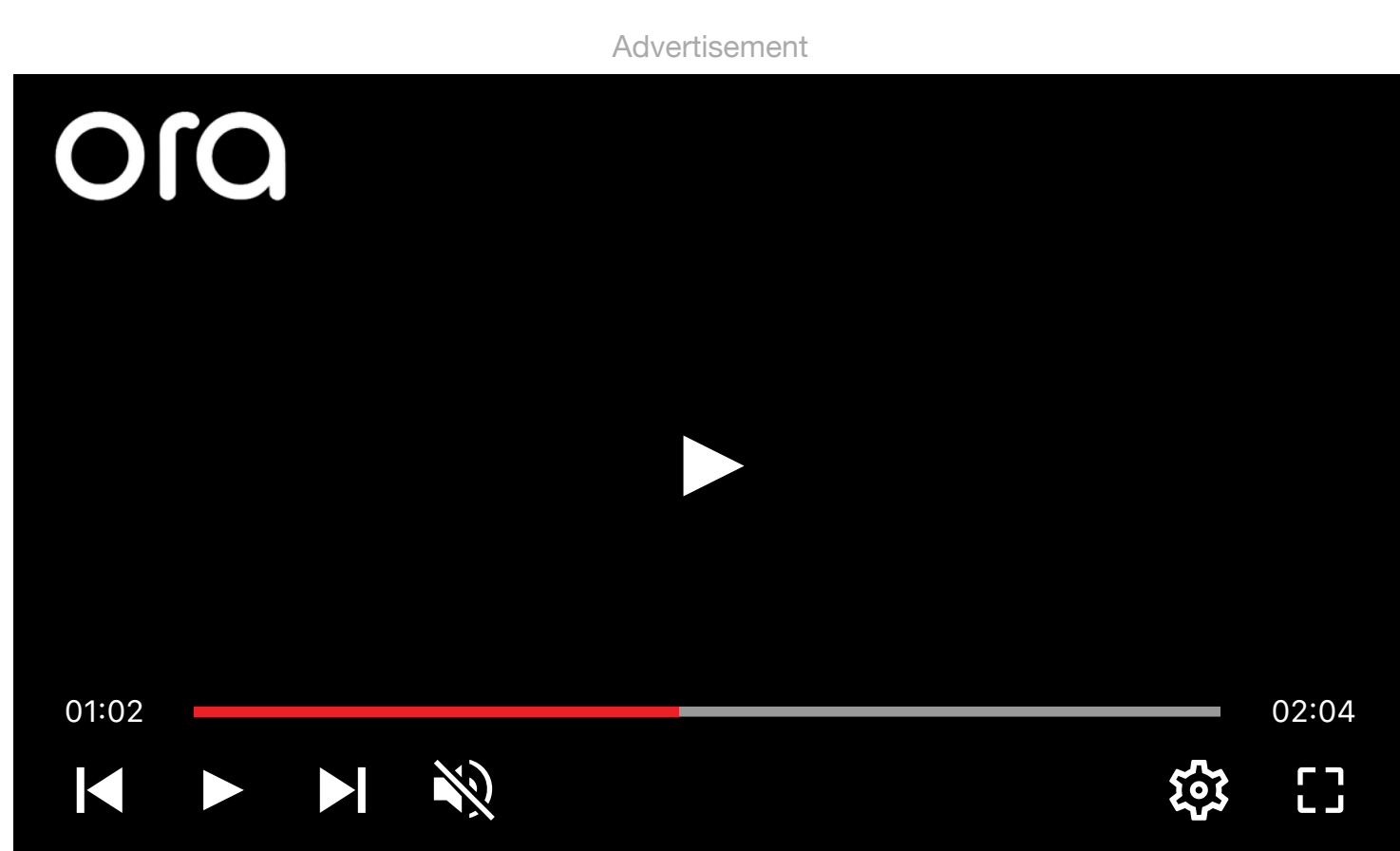


Now, with Atlantic City on the verge of going broke — and paying its police and firefighters with IOUs — a proposed state takeover of the resort's finances and major decision-making power is further rankling many residents who fear they will lose what little voice they now have over their own affairs. Blacks comprise about 38 percent of the city's 39,000 residents and Hispanics 30 percent.

"No town in America wants to be taken over, none," said Walter Palmer, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who helped elect Atlantic City's first black mayor in the 1980s, and who rues what he sees as the steady dilution of the city's rights and representation since then. "You can't take away people's rights and sovereignty. But in these black municipalities that are faltering, there are these efforts to take over."

The man he helped elect as mayor, James Ustry, was one of 13 current or former officials and businessmen targeted by a state police bribery sting in 1989. The mayor entered a pretrial intervention program, and only one of the 13, a city councilman, was found guilty. Many residents claim the sting was part of a state plan to dilute black political power in Atlantic City — something they say endures to this day.

Council President Marty Small was charged by the state twice with voter fraud and was acquitted both times. He sued the state for malicious prosecution but lost.



"The people that live here have earned the right to say what goes on in our own town," said James Haley, who owns a downtown clothing store. "It's not right for someone to just come in and say, 'Here's how it's going to be.'"

Resident Tiffany Burns said, "I don't like that my opinion won't matter."

The proposed takeover would give the state vast authority over Atlantic City's affairs, including the right to dissolve agencies, cancel decisions by local elected officials, and sell off city assets, including land and a water utility coveted by private operators.

"They took our rights, they took our sovereignty, and now they want to take our water," said Steve Young, a community activist who was arrested when he refused to stop testifying against the takeover at a hearing in the state Capitol last month.

Republican Gov. Chris Christie said Atlantic City's residents have been failed by generations of elected officials who ran the city's debt up to levels that became unsustainable once the casino gravy train ended. Four of the city's 12 casinos shut down in 2014, and Atlantic City's casino revenue has fallen from \$5.2 billion in 2006 to \$2.56 billion last year.

"Atlantic City's finances are in such disrepair because of this local waste and mismanagement," Christie said in a recent speech. "Unless the state steps in and deals with the cost side of the equation, this problem will not be magically resolved by another financial Band-Aid from the taxpayers of New Jersey."

The state has long wielded power in Atlantic City. Its Casino Reinvestment Development Authority collects casino payments for development projects. In 2010, the state created a Tourism District including the casinos and the downtown shopping area, taking over public safety and sanitation oversight.

Anthony Williams, a taxi driver, noted that the state already has imposed monitors on the local government and schools who have to approve major spending decisions.

"The state has been here for over 10 years; they knew what was going on all along," he said. "If there's a problem, then do something. Now it's a big emergency and they want to take total control?"

Abdullah Anderson lost his barber shop to a fire in January and agonized over whether to open somewhere else, largely because of uncertainty over what the state might have in mind for downtown. He reopened in a different spot because he said his customers rely on the barber shop as a de facto community center.

"I didn't know whether it was worth it to reopen if the state takes over," he said. "Do they want us off this avenue? How much might taxes go up? Who knows what they're going to do when they take over?"

Nael Zumot came here from Jordan but has found it tough. More people seem to come through the doors of his downtown deli to bum a cigarette or ask for a dollar than to buy something.

He lost his first business location to an eminent domain action to make way for a casino project that never got built. His taxes rose from \$4,800 to \$15,000 in just a few years; a successful appeal reduced them slightly, to \$12,000. His business is down 70 percent since the casino closings of 2014.

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