

Tax dollars being used to lure violent game creator to Nevada

By Anjeanette Damon, Las Vegas Sun

Last month, the Nevada Economic Development Board signed off on a plan to invest \$600,000 in tax dollars in a video game development company looking to relocate to Las Vegas.

The decision to approve the money for Take-Two Interactive garnered little notice at the time and won unanimous support from the board. In fact, the decision dovetailed perfectly with Gov. Brian Sandoval's economic development plan of attracting more high-tech firms – and specifically entertainment technology firms – to Nevada.

But within the roster of video games developed by Take-Two Interactive is "Grand Theft Auto" and its sequels – games that have become poster children for the violent video games at the center of a debate in the wake of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

In an ugly irony, the board approved the money for the game developer the same day the shooting took place – a fact that most board members weren't even aware of during the meeting or that was mentioned in the discussion.

The full details of the horror at Sandy Hook were just emerging as the board considered the tax incentive for Take-Two Interactive.

"I personally didn't hear about it until after we adjourned and my chief of staff said to me, 'My God, did you see what happened?'" said board member and Secretary of State Ross Miller.

“Grand Theft Auto” is a critically acclaimed video game upon which Take-Two Interactive depends heavily for its revenue. It’s also decried by many who believe video game violence is at the root of societal violence today.

National Rifle Association Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre mentioned the game specifically while arguing that curtailing violent video games is more important than gun control.

In “Grand Theft Auto,” players steal cars – often violently. They can also participate in all manner of virtual mayhem, including rape and clubbing to death a prostitute to avoid paying for sex. (Some critics dispute that what is depicted in the video game is actually rape.)

“It’s disgusting. It’s repugnant,” former state Sen. Sheila Leslie said.

“I’m troubled by much of what we’re doing here,” Leslie said, referring generally to the use of tax dollars to draw private companies to the state. “But I didn’t know we could stoop to this level. It is unbelievable to me that we would invest in a business like this.”

A spokesman for Take-Two Interactive said the company has not become involved in the recent debate over video game violence and directed questions to the industry’s trade association. Calls to the Entertainment Software Association were not returned.

The decision to invest tax dollars in Take-Two raises the question of whether social issues should be part of deciding which companies should earn tax incentives.

In addition to fitting into Nevada’s economic development plan, Take-Two will become a business tenant in redeveloping downtown Las Vegas, bringing with it 150 quality-assurance jobs paying an average of \$18 an hour.

"We're happy that Take-Two chose Nevada and is bringing 150 really good jobs. We are happy to have them here," said Sandoval's economic development director Steve Hill.

He added it's unfair to draw a nexus between the types of games Take-Two creates and violence such as occurred in Newtown.

"It's unfair to imply a correlation between such a horrible tragedy without any evidence there is a correlation," he said.

Studies into the effect of video game violence are mixed. The video game industry holds no correlation exists between societal violence and video games. The American Psychological Association, however, finds violent video games can lead to an increase in aggression and hostility in some youth.

Many legislative leaders said the fact the company has violent video games in a library that includes sports games and others for a younger audience shouldn't necessarily be a deal breaker.

Miller said he doesn't believe violent video games play a role in atrocities such as the Sandy Hook mass shooting and would have voted to approve the money even if he had known what was taking place.

Democratic Sens. Debbie Smith and Mo Denis said a decency test would be difficult to administer in economic development.

"I personally have concerns about violent games, having raised three children, but on the economic development side, it's a bit of a slippery slope once you start making judgments on companies based on whether or not you approve of the product," Smith said.

Assembly Minority Leader Pat Hickey, R-Reno, admitted he's troubled by violent video games. But he sees another potential upside to bringing Take-Two to Nevada.

“The Legislature may want to invite their CEO to be a part of any discussion we have regarding the influences of video game violence on the young. Who knows, instead of “Grand Theft Auto,” we might influence them to do an interactive version of ‘Little House on the Prairie.’”

It’s perhaps a silly question to ask in Las Vegas, where the economy is driven by vice.

“Nevada is too moral?” Hickey scoffed. “I mean, please, with all of our institutionalized vices, I don’t think we are in position to make that call.”