

Lincoln Park rolls dice on RIPTA promo

But advocates for the poor denounce the \$84,000 deal to decorate seven buses that stop at the dog track with ads promoting \$10 in cash and food.

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LINCOLN -- The state's public transit authority and Lincoln Park have partnered on a new program rewarding people who ride the bus to the race track with \$5 in cash and a \$5 food credit.

The new promotion is part of a larger campaign that Lincoln Park is launching to get more gamblers through its doors and -- once there -- to stay longer.

But several advocates for the poor are questioning the incentive, saying it targets the elderly, poor and disabled.

"This is the population that's most vulnerable to thinking that if they go and gamble, they'll hit the jackpot and . . . get out of poverty," said Heidi Collins, director of Rhode Island Parents for Progress. "By offering these incentives, it really makes it more difficult for people who have the least amount of money."

"We are concerned about using a public service to encourage gambling," said Kate Brewster, director of the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College.

The promotion goes beyond the \$10 in cash and food.

Lincoln Park has paid the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority \$84,000 to adorn seven buses that stop at the track with special advertisements. The buses have been transformed into rolling billboards, every inch covered with the Lincoln Park advertisement. One side of the bus shows a couple kissing and calls the vehicle a "Lincoln Park Fun Bus."



Journal photo / Mary Murphy

Advertising for a new Lincoln Park promotion wraps around a RIPTA bus driven by Anita Cornwell in Kennedy Plaza, Providence, yesterday. The bus, which makes regular stops at the gambling facility, is one of seven with the same advertisements.

The other side shows more people having fun and encourages potential gamblers to "Hop on board for \$10 in Fun Bus Rewards." Inside, another advertisement includes coupons that riders can tear off for the cash and the food credit.

RIPTA buses stop at Lincoln Park about 40 times a day on their trips between Providence and Woonsocket. The service has been in place for about seven years.

"The idea of giving vouchers for gambling credits and food for those who ride RIPTA is an obvious attempt to encourage those who can least afford it to lose their money," said Robert Breen, director of the Rhode Island Gambling Treatment Program. "For any problem gamblers, it's just a shove in the wrong direction."

Lincoln Park spokeswoman Cynthia Stern said the new promotion, which starts Monday, is not targeted at one group, but part of a larger campaign to reach the general public. The track and slot hall is also advertising on TV, radio and in The Providence Journal.

"No one is compelling them to go. No one is compelling them to get off the bus," Stern said. "However, if they would like to enjoy Lincoln Park, we would encourage them to do so."

Numerous casinos, including Foxwoods, Mohegan Sun and those in Atlantic City, N.J., offer incentives for people who arrive on buses. But, for the most part, those are private coach lines. (Lincoln Park will also be offering a similar promotion through the private Peter Pan Bus Lines and Conway Tours.)

RIPTA spokeswoman Karen Mensel defended the program, saying the transit authority is just taking in ad money as it does from any other client.

RIPTA gets 60 percent of the \$84,000 ad buy. The rest goes to its ad agency, Direct Media. As part of the deal, Mensel said, Lincoln Park is required to place RIPTA's logo on its promotions.

"Whether gambling is morally or socially acceptable is not decided at the RIPTA level," Mensel said. "RIPTA is trying to raise its revenues as many people have suggested it try to do. Taking advertising on our buses from various companies is one of the ways we try to do that."

If RIPTA refused the ad, she said, it could be sued for discrimination or censorship.

Gamblers arriving at Lincoln Park by bus must sign up for a Players Club card to get the promotion. They will immediately get a \$5 food credit. They must also swipe their card at a kiosk when arriving and again when leaving. If they stay at least four hours, they will receive \$5 in cash if they visit the facility again within seven days.

This promotion and others are part of a push by Lincoln Park's new owners, BLB Investors, to raise revenues. State lottery figures show that more money is being gambled at Lincoln Park than ever before. However, growth at the track has been slower than in past years and what state analysts had predicted.

Lincoln Park launched its Players Club earlier this week, replacing the old Diamond Club. To kick off the program, the track is offering special food discounts to its Players Club members including a \$1.99 breakfast, \$4.95 bottomless pasta bowl and \$7.95 prime rib special. One morning this week, lines were 25 people deep to sign up for the new card.

Players Club cards cannot be inserted into slot machines to track how much a person gambles. Lincoln Park hopes to have that capability just like casinos across the country have. However there is no timetable for such a system.

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