



**The Times Union, July 16, 2007**

*Just call him an advocate*

*By James M. Odatto*

Jeff Gural, who spent a small fortune purchasing, fixing up and installing 1,500 video slot machines at Tioga Downs and Vernon Downs in the past two years, is scheduled to come to Albany today to try to explain why he isn't a lobbyist.

Gural acknowledges he's pushed for legislation to help harness track operators, including him. He needs the help, he said, because his investment in the tracks is losing \$1 million a month.

Two years ago, Gural pushed for a law that raised the percentages VLT operators get to keep, and he's backing another measure to get even more. Passed the Senate, it's under negotiation in the Assembly.

In an interview, the Manhattan real estate executive said he was contacted by the Temporary State Commission on Lobbying about his activities.

"I can't imagine I would be considered a lobbyist," said Gural, who pays lobbyist James Crane \$10,000 a month. "I'm not getting paid by anybody."

Failure to register as a lobbyist could bring stiff penalties. The law defines a lobbyist as someone working for passage or defeat of a bill and who spends or is paid at least \$5,000.

Gural has helped write legislation and has e-mailed numerous gaming officials to tell of his success in killing a bill that would have increased purses for horse owners.

"I am a better lobbyist than anything else," he said during a panel discussion at the Harness Tracks of America and the Thoroughbred Racing Associations joint conference in Florida in March. His advice, according to the transcript: "Do the lobbying yourself; get to know these people."

He also said lobbying involves donating to politicians. Indeed, in 2006 alone, Gural gave about \$181,500 to various candidates, including \$22,000 to the Spitzer/Paterson campaign and \$25,000 to Andrew Cuomo.

"They didn't seem bashful at all about taking money from people," he said of New York's politicians.

When more is less

Every year New York's school aid budget goes up it seems politicians boast of another record investment in children.

A new study from the Rockefeller Institute, however, offers another perspective. The report says the state actually has been spending less per pupil as time goes on. Between 2002 and 2005, for example, state per-pupil spending dropped \$129. When property taxes and federal aid were included, though, combined spending rose \$1,304 per student.

One reason for the decline, said report co-author Suho Bae, is that while the state may be spending more, it apparently isn't keeping up with the influx of new students.