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Tuesday, 20 November 2012 19:05

http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/112212/bicsSM.png**Bic's Place contest that awarded $80,000, drew huge crowds results in request for criminal charges, undersheriff says**

The Ozaukee County Sheriff's Department has busted what authorities said was an illegal, high-stakes raffle at Bic's Place tavern and recreation center in Belgium that awarded roughly $80,000 in prizes over the last 10 months, drew crowds of people from throughout the region and has left a respected business owner in trouble with the law.

The sheriff's department confiscated the $25,000 awarded to the grand prize winner on Nov. 2 and $3,000 intended as seed money for next year's raffle, Undersheriff Jim Johnson said Monday.

Authorities have asked Ozaukee County District Attorney Adam Gerol to charge Bic's Place owner Claire Bichler with commercial gambling, a felony, although they said they don't believe Bichler profited directly from the raffle.

"All the prize money was paid out," Johnson said, noting, however, that Bic's Place profited from a significant increase in business due to the raffle.

"I don't think she meant to hurt anyone. I think it just got out of hand," he said. "This was intended to be a small, weekly event that would keep patrons around on Fridays. It got much larger than she intended. She didn't profit directly from the raffle."

Contacted via e-mail this week, Bichler declined to comment.

The sheriff's department is not seeking criminal charges against any of the raffle winners,

Johnson said.

“We’re considering them victims,” he said. “A lot of them thought it was legal.”

Although the raffle drew participants “from all over” before the grand prize was awarded, it only recently came to the attention of authorities through a confidential informant, Johnson said. The department also received a call about the raffle from the Sheboygan County Sheriff’s Department, he said.

Attracting hundreds of people to the tavern and recreation center at 129 Spring St. every Friday night, the raffle was perhaps one of the worst kept secrets in the county.

As the pot grew, the raffle took on the feel of a community event, sources said. The indoor volleyball courts were used to help accommodate the crowds and at least one community group was invited to sell concessions at the bar during raffle nights, Johnson said.

The crowds grew as the pot increased, Johnson said.

“These people weren’t just from the area,” he said. “Apparently, there were people from all over. I’ve heard some people came from Illinois for this. This was all by word of mouth.”

Last year, Johnson said, the raffle only awarded a grand prize of $450. But this year, when no one won the prize week after week for roughly 40 weeks, the pot grew significantly.

Johnson said the $1 tickets to what he termed a ping pong raffle were only sold on Friday nights, and participants had to be present to win.

The winning number — in this case 61 — was selected. Each week, some participants were picked to select one of 100 numbered ping pong balls. If they picked the ball with 61 on it, they would be the winner, Johnson said. If they didn’t, they got a second chance, and if they selected the winning ball they would receive half the prize money.

If no one won, the pot would roll over to the next week.

The first week, the prize was $450, Johnson said. When it reached $25,000, he said, Bichler changed the rules to cap the pot and to award $500 prizes with the excess money each week. She allegedly picked names to determine these winners.

Johnson said the first week the extra prizes were given away, a total of $4,000 was awarded. By the third week, the amount reached $14,500. On Nov. 2, when the grand prize was awarded, an additional $20,000 was awarded.

Bichler told deputies that as the raffle kept rolling over and the prize pot grew, she felt obligated to keep it going because she wanted to turn the money over to the patrons, Johnson said.

Bic's Place continues to be open. A Nov. 13 post on the tavern's FaceBook page noted "Just so everyone knows. No we have not been closed down by anyone or any govt. agency as rumors have it. Yes we are open as normal."

When contacted Monday, Belgium Village President Richard Howells said he had heard "bits and pieces" of the investigation.

He said the village doesn't plan to seek revocation of the tavern's liquor license because the alleged incident isn't liquor related.

"We have no authority unless it's liquor related," Howells said.

While declining to comment on the situation, Howells said that Bic's Place is an upstanding village business.

"They've offered a lot, a place to recreate, a place to unwind," he said. "And Claire's always been very good to the village."

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FOR MONTHS, Bic's Place tavern and recreation center in Belgium has been the hottest spot in town because of what authorities said was an illegal raffle that awarded $80,000 in prize money over the last ten months. Photo by Sam Arendt