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Rhode Island's carnival of prostitution

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Donna M. Hughes: R.I.'s carnival of prostitution

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DONNA M. HUGHES



AFTER MY EXPERIENCE at the Senate Judiciary Committee last Thursday, I believe Rhode Island is headed for a human rights disaster and nationwide political embarrassment. It is becoming apparent that the Senate is not going to pass a much-needed prostitution bill. Rhode Island will continue to have an expanding number of spa-brothels, prostitution of minors in clubs, and no law that will enable the police to stop it.

The hearing (on Senate bill 0596, to close the loophole allowing indoor prostitution) was a sordid circus, with pimps and prostitutes coming forward to oppose the legislation.

Midway through the hearing, filmmaker Tara Hurley ushered in women and men she collected from the spa-brothels. They settled in the back of the room. Somewhat later, the women made a dash out of the room and hid in the hallway. Hurley had to coax them back in to testify with an explanation to the committee that they are afraid of cameras.

One 53-year-old Korean woman who needed a translator to speak said she worked as a "receptionist." She said she had never seen any women coerced into prostitution. But at the end of her testimony she revealed that she had previously been arrested for being a pimp.

Then a man reeking of cigarette smoke and other odors came forward. He was identified to me by Hurley as a pimp. He claimed credit for the growth of the spa-brothels in Rhode Island for his now-deceased wife. Another Korean woman came forward and said she did "it" for depressed,

shy guys who needed stress relief. She implicated construction workers, judges and lawyers. She proudly exclaimed that she does “it” to make money.

Then a tattooed woman, calling herself a “sexologist and sex educator,” spoke against the bill. She is also a reporter for a prostitutes’ magazine called \$pread. (I couldn’t make this stuff up!)

All of their testimonies were accepted by the committee without critical questions. Their outrageous appearance and statements muted the serious, precise testimonies of representatives of the Rhode Island state police, the attorney general’s office, the Providence police, and Richard Israel, a former attorney general and Rhode Island Superior Court judge.

Two senators, Charles Levesque and Rhoda Perry, who are known opponents of the prostitution bill, dominated the hearing. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Michael McCaffery left and turned the hearing over to Senator Levesque, who seemed pleased and entertained by the cadre from the sex industry.

On at least two occasions, Senator Levesque has expressed his opposition to a prostitution bill to me in e-mails. During my testimony, he badgered me to make a statement I knew wasn’t true, until Sen. Leo Blais had to get out of his seat to calm his colleague down.

Also during my testimony, Senator Perry challenged my report by reading to me from the work of Ron Weitzer, an academic advocate of decriminalized prostitution when it’s indoors. In a June 18 letter published in The Journal (“Some lurid prostitution myths debunked”), he called Rhode Island’s laws — and lack of laws — “a model for other states.”

I have testified at hearings in the State House on a number of occasions. Never have I witnessed such a carnival. In April, I testified for the House prostitution bill (Rep. Joanne Giannini’s H-5044A) and the atmosphere was serious and respectful, even though there was opposition to the bill.

In contrast to the passive encouragement for prostitution in Rhode Island in the Senate Judiciary Committee, earlier on Thursday [Governor Carcieri](#) held a press conference calling for passage of the House bill. He was supported by state police Supt. Col. Brendan Doherty and the attorney general’s office. Freshman Rep. Robert DaSilva, a Pawtucket police officer, spoke compellingly about the problem of prostitution. He said there is more juvenile prostitution than he has ever seen before. Representative Giannini said that we do not want Rhode Island to be a safe haven for the sex industry.

The end of the [General Assembly](#) session is near. From my observation, I believe the Senate is going to let another year go by without a prostitution law. This will be a tragedy for victims caught in the sex industry, a black eye for Rhode Island’s reputation, and a victory for the pimps.

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