

# Regulating video arcades is no game

*Chester Smolski*

Improvement on Washington Street is needed.

The Providence Board of Licenses is about to determine if the Saturn's Rings video arcade on Washington Street should have its license renewed. The issue is as critical as it is controversial.

Video arcades are the new money-makers that the electronic revolution has bestowed. These games capture the interest of many teenagers, and when large numbers of young people gather at these arcades, problems may result.

Electronic game machines create few problems if few of them are available and if they are used with other activities such as restaurants and cinemas. But when the principal use of a business is just these games and the number of machines is large (the name arcade is used to describe this activity), it becomes difficult to control the many young people who congregate there.

The arcade issue is not unique to Providence. Other cities are groping with the same problem, seeking to control the installation of video games to minimize their adverse effects on neighborhoods.

A recent issue of *Planning* magazine describes some practices used by communities to regulate arcades.

They may be controlled by limiting their proximity to churches, schools and bars. Babylon, New York, prohibits video arcades within 500 feet of churches and schools, and San Gabriel, Calif., prohibits their location within 300 feet of a bar. In Providence, by contrast, the arcade is next to a bar — and this means that young people can go from one to the other.

Litter control is handled in Mesquite, Texas, by the arcade owners working with the city in cleaning nearby litter. In Providence, this cooperative effort should be easy, since the owner of the arcade is a city employee. Graffiti or visual litter has increased markedly on Washington Street since the appearance of the arcade; perhaps the owner should be required to assume responsibility for removing it.

Other regulations — limits on operating hours, age of customers, signs and parking — have been instituted in other cities to control what can become an ugly scene. An alleged assault took place just outside Saturn's Rings, and many pedestrians find it intimidating just to walk by that arcade.

To this observer, the interior of the arcade is uninviting. Dirty, worn and torn rugs, dirt on the

walls, odors and crudely written signs (No Smoking, No Drinking, No Loitering, etc.) make it look like a sloppy operation and makes one wonder if these conditions meet the city's health and sanitation codes. Its appearance does nothing to enhance the downtown. Arcades need not be sloppy: those in suburban malls show that arcades can be attractive as well as lucrative.

When the manager of the Biltmore Plaza shows that \$37,200 of bookings was lost and guests will not return "because of the problems on lower Washington Street and the element that was being attracted there," there is little doubt that Saturn's Rings is a detriment to the environment of that street — one of several fragile retail corridors in the city center that needs help.

Some people feel uncomfortable walking by the bus stop on Washington Street, and that, in combination with Saturn's Rings, make that stretch of street uninviting and engenders fear in the minds of pedestrians. This is not what a downtown street should be — the Board of Licenses has it in its power to alleviate the situation.

There are many empty stores downtown, so it is difficult and not desirable to cause the closing of a business. Further, in our free-enterprise system, is there not room for this type of activity, especially one whose market is a proven one? But where to locate?

When a local night spot on South Main Street was faced with license suspension, the proprietor moved the establishment to Allens Avenue. In that location, the club's activities will cause little neighborhood disruption. Are there not some locations on the downtown periphery, as on Richmond and Pine Streets, where an arcade will be less obtrusive and create fewer problems?

Right now there is little doubt that Saturn's Rings does little to enhance Washington Street; rather, it serves as a detriment to the retail development of the area. But there is a market for this activity, so why cannot the city help the arcade owner find a less visible location, to which an audience will find its way?

A better arcade operation in a cleaner environment and in a less visible location offers compromise for a difficult case. The Board of Licenses can make a start by not renewing the license of Saturn's Rings on Washington Street.

The License Board will decide Wednesday.

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