

September 21, 1995

Dear Fellow Owners,

Bowling Alone...the words that took us from our occasional appearances on the sports or business pages to the editorial and features sections. "Bowling Alone: Democracy in America at the End of the Twentieth Century" is the title of a paper delivered at a Nobel Symposium in Sweden by a Harvard political science professor, Robert Putnam. The paper has since been cited by Newt Gingrich, Barbara Mikulski, and George Will among others, and even presented at Camp David.

Putnam concluded that our society is endangered by the membership decline in face to face groups. He cites PTAs, the Federation of Women's Clubs and the Boy Scouts among these groups, but clearly the reference that caught everyone's attention was his inclusion of bowling leagues. Putnam noted that during the period he was studying total bowling participation increased while league membership declined. William Powers, writing in *The Washington Post*, argued persuasively not to worry --- we were really individualists all along. George Will, whose son Jon is a regular Bowl America bowler, felt that the first sign of the success of conservatism would be increased participation in bowling leagues. With an election year approaching such a burden is almost too much to bear.

Dr. Putnam designates bowling leagues as sites of democracy because of the interaction among the members that spreads beyond their immediate involvement in the competition, building what he calls social capital. He feels that participating together builds patterns of cooperation that are vital to our ability to deal with community problems. Those of you who have visited this space in the past will know how pleased we are to see a public discussion of the value of being a participant, rather than a spectator, particularly when every state in which we operate is considering public financing of spectator sports venues. Our experience is consistent with all of the recent economic studies, which suggests that such funding simply results in a shift in recreation spending from doing to watching.

Nothing in this review of how people spend their leisure time suggests any change in the observations we have shared previously with you. People adjust their recreation activities to accommodate changes in their schedules. They do not increase their total recreation expenditures as more options become available; rather they reorder their priorities. They change their total recreation expenditures as their expectations of their earnings change, except in the case of gambling, which often diverts money from other activities.

There is of course an interrelation among these influences. When members of our daytime ladies leagues started to go back

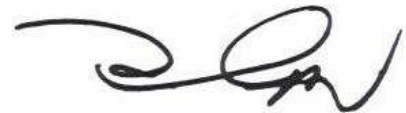
to work in the late seventies they had more money to spend on recreation, but were no longer available when we had the most lanes open. And over the last few years the decline in construction work gave some of our best customers more time off, but their reduced earnings expectations meant they were no longer bowling as much. Contrary to the view I expressed here only last year, it is clear now that people in the Washington area have continuing concerns about their future earnings, particularly if they are in any way dependent on the federal government.

We will also face the problem that many of our customers will reorder their priorities because of actions beyond our control. In Maryland, for all practical purposes, you can no longer smoke in a bowling center. We have already seen a dramatic decline in league bowling in the centers effected, as smokers find the restriction limits their enjoyment of the game, and there has been no increase in "non-smoking" traffic.

As recently as 1992 I reported to you that we built our service concept around the league bowler, becoming the bowling centers for people who loved to bowl. Our theory was that you needed regular participation to develop the skills to make the game most interesting. But variety in itself is an attribute of fun and there is a substantial group of people that would rather be Jacks of all Trades. In any case, we must adapt to the fact that it is getting more difficult to recruit league bowlers by making our leagues more attractive, and by finding non-league promotions that rely on something other than price reductions to generate sales.

Our physical facilities are better than they have ever been and they are near our potential customers. We have been using independent shoppers who have reported that our service is better than it has ever been. Male and female bowlers skills overlap to such an extent that leagues can be organized without regard to gender. Almost anyone can be taught to bowl. And over 95% of adults do not currently bowl in a league.

That's a great potential for a great game whose importance to the community is being recognized anew. It's a potential we have the staff, the facilities and the commitment to realize.



Leslie H. Goldberg, *President*
