

Gaming chair keeping eye on Davenport casino developments

Written by Administrator

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The chairman of the state's gaming regulatory board said Friday that he's watching what happens in Davenport "very closely" as the city makes moves to operate a casino there, but he doesn't think other casino operators have to worry that the acrimony that erupted in Sioux City will spread to other casinos.

"That was just a very unique set of circumstances," said Jeff Lamberti, a former state senator and attorney from Ankeny. "Licenses are privileges, they are not a right."

Four partnerships are bidding for the Sioux City casino license held by Penn Gaming Co. which runs the Argosy Casino. The license was put up for bid after the nonprofit license holder pushed to replace the boat with a land-based casino.

Lamberti made his comments during a taping of Iowa Public Television's "Iowa Press" show, which is scheduled for broadcast on Dec. 28 and Dec. 31. He was joined on the show by Wes Ehrecke, president of — and chief lobbyist for — the Iowa Gaming Association.

Iowa has 15 casinos, three race tracks and two Native American-run casinos. The 15 state casinos accounted for more than \$1 billion in adjusted gross revenue in the 2012 fiscal year that ended this summer.

In Davenport, the city has proposed creating a city-appointed nonprofit board to run its casino, which would be a unique relationship for a city and gaming company in the state. Lamberti said he's reserving judgment on the idea until he gets a specific proposal from the city, but he doesn't like the idea of splitting casino operations between downtown Davenport and one near Interstate 80.

"I will tell you and I've told (city officials), I have some concerns about the location, because I believe an interstate location is the prime location there," he said. "The difference is while we have to take into account what happens in the local community — that's a big part of what we do — the commission represents the state of Iowa. We have to see what's going on in the rest of the world, so to speak."

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Ehrecke said his clients also are watching what happens in Davenport with concern, especially if it leads to other municipalities wanting to take a larger role in their licenses.

“We’re certainly watching this with some interest, that whole idea of a municipality managing and running a casino, that would be unprecedented. It’s raised a lot of questions,” he said. “There’s a lot of unknowns right now. We just have members raising a lot of questions.”

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