

## Eastie casino bid adopts ground game

Written by Administrator  
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An army of paid and volunteer East Boston backers of the Suffolk Downs-Caesars casino bid are buttonholing neighbors at house parties, coffee hours and street corners in a street-level campaign to win neighborhood approval of the controversial gaming palace.

All told, several hundred volunteers have joined forces with the racetrack and its “Friends of Suffolk Downs” group, a corporate-infused grassroots effort to create a political ground game in the East Boston casino battle.

Steering the Eastie pro-casino effort are a half dozen local powerbrokers on Suffolk Downs’ payroll, chief among them: Anthony Albano, a longtime Mayor Thomas M. Menino operative, and Jason Ruggiero, son of Joseph Ruggiero, owner of a landmark East Boston funeral home and former chamber of commerce president.

“I’m just doing a lot of groundwork right now,” said Albano, 65, an East Boston High School disciplinarian, noting he has been putting up signs on homes and businesses and knocking on doors. “We’re working for Tom Menino, who we believe in, and for a casino that we believe will be good for the whole community.”

Suffolk Downs is competing against Wynn Resorts — which has similarly financed a pro-casino citizens group in Everett — and Foxwoods in Milford for the sole Eastern Massachusetts casino license.

No date has been set for the East Boston casino referendum as the city and Suffolk Downs are still negotiating a community agreement, Menino spokeswoman Dot Joyce said.

Celeste Myers, head of No Eastie Casino, said it’s daunting going up against the well-financed pro-casino organization.

“What Caesars is doing is using these familiar faces with very deep connections in the community,” she said, noting Albano is “a much-loved fixture in the community” who “already

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has got a list in his back pocket for every house he knows he can slap a sign onto.”

While she and her backers staple anti-casino signs on her landlord’s driveway, the pro-casino faction has a Bennington Street headquarters, and has spent more than \$1 million on the campaign. That includes hiring politically wired Northwind Strategies — founded by high-powered Democratic strategist Doug Rubin — and the Dewey Square Group to craft public and community relations strategies.

“We did not just parachute into this community, but have spent years building a grassroots network to help educate the public on the project and listen to their input neighborhood by neighborhood and family by family,” Suffolk Downs chief Chip Tuttle said.

Countered Myers: “Their billions can’t buy passion ... they can’t buy moms and dads with strollers who stand outside and share cookies and slush and stories of why they are trying to save the beauty of East Boston.”

Meanwhile, Diane Ingemi, 55, a property manager, plans to host a pro-casino party this summer on the deck of her Orient Heights home that overlooks Suffolk Downs, where one day she hopes to stroll to for cocktails and a little gambling.

“My neighbors, all of us are for it,” Ingemi said. “We are just reaching out to whomever we can, spreading the word around.”

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