

## **W. Springfield rejects casino; Plainridge wins approval**

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By Mark Arsenault, Globe Staff

West Springfield voters on Tuesday dealt a devastating blow to an \$800 million Hard Rock casino plan, rejecting the proposal at a referendum and eliminating a prominent competitor for the Western Massachusetts resort casino license.

The vote makes Hard Rock the first gambling project proposed under the 2011 casino law to be defeated at a public referendum. After a campaign that featured an overwhelming spending advantage by casino proponents, the final tally was 4,165 against and 3,413 in favor of the project. The special election's turnout was 45.7 percent, according to the West Springfield city clerk's office.

The defeat leaves just two applicants for the Western Mass. license: MGM in Springfield and Mohegan Sun in Palmer.

Halfway across the state, voters in Plainville on Tuesday endorsed a Penn National Gaming Inc. slot parlor venture at Plainridge Racecourse, completing a remarkable turnaround for a project that seemed doomed just last month.

The Plainville vote was 1,582 in favor to 502 opposed, for a turnout of about 37 percent.

The results were read at the Beatrice Wood School, the town's lone polling location, to a loud cheer from about 25 townspeople, many of whom said that public opinion had been swayed by the promise of more than \$4 million a year in additional tax revenues, and a strong desire to protect the state's last harness racing venue.

"We got our votes out, this town needs this," said Dale Bergvine, a lifelong resident and a member of a pro-slots group, People for Plainville.

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Prospects for a gambling and restaurant complex at Plainridge, off Interstate 495 and Route 1 about 5 miles south of Gillette Stadium, appeared grim last month, when casino regulators ruled the track's ownership group unfit to compete for the state's sole slot parlor license. The decision was mostly based on revelations that former track president Gary Piontkowski had taken more than \$1 million from the struggling track's money room over several years.

But Penn National made an 11th-hour move to secure an option to buy the track, after its request for a zoning change to accommodate a slots operation in Tewksbury was turned down by residents.

Last week, Plainville selectmen agreed to transfer the host community agreement they had previously negotiated with Plainridge's owners to Penn National, and the state Gaming Commission voted to accept the transfer, allowing Penn to pursue the slots license for the track. Penn still must pass its state background check, expected to be finished this month.

Plainridge spokesman Bill Ryan said Tuesday's vote reflects a tremendous amount of confidence in the project. "It's not bad considering we were dead three weeks ago," he said, grinning.

Casino opponent Mary-Ann Greanier, a member of No Plainville Racino, said her group is considering its next move, which could include a lawsuit. "The process isn't working," she said. "The safeguards we were told to expect are not taking place."

Penn will compete for the slots license with the Cordish Cos., which is planning a gambling parlor in Leominster, and with Raynham Park, the simulcast betting parlor and former dog racing track in Raynham. Cordish and Raynham Park have passed background checks, and Raynham voters have endorsed the Raynham Park proposal in a referendum. Leominster residents will vote Sept. 24.

A slots proposal in Millbury ended last week when the developer, an affiliate of Rush Street Gaming, withdrew the project, citing a lack of community support.

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In West Springfield, Hard Rock had pitched its casino for the grounds of the Eastern States Exposition, home of the annual Big E agricultural fair. Hard Rock ran an intensive campaign the past several months to try to overcome early polling numbers that suggested the election would be a tough battle for the Florida-based gambling operation. The company in July signed a host community deal with West Springfield that would have provided more than \$26 million in annual payments to the community and the region, with a minimum \$18 million guaranteed to West Springfield each year, if Hard Rock had won the casino license.

The vote will be seen as a major confidence booster for poorly funded casino opposition groups. They were able to defeat the West Springfield project even though Hard Rock spent close to \$1 million to urge voters to support it, according to campaign finance reports.

The Western Mass. region, once flush with competition from gambling companies, is down to two. MGM has already won the endorsement of Springfield voters. Residents of Palmer go to the polls Nov. 5 to decide the fate of the Mohegan Sun plan. Both companies are still awaiting the results of their state background checks.

The state gambling commission expects to award the resort license early next year.

Three applicants are competing for the Greater Boston resort casino license: Suffolk Downs, in East Boston; Wynn Resorts, in Everett; and Foxwoods, in Milford.

Bidding for a resort casino license in Southeastern Massachusetts is ongoing; the deadline for new applicants is Sept. 30. No developers have applied.

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