

Casino idea debated at city council meeting

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 08 January 2014 13:54 -

SARATOGA SPRINGS >> Nearly 100 people crowded into the City Council room, spilling into the hallway of City Hall on Tuesday evening, and many of them were there to voice opinions on whether there is a place for a full-gaming casino in Spa City.

The majority of speakers during the public comment period before the City Council meeting were members of SAVE Saratoga, short for Saratogians Against Vegas-style Expansion.

On Nov. 5, nearly 54 percent of Saratoga County voters and 58 percent of Saratoga Springs voters voted against expanded gambling, although in contrast, both county and city officials unanimously passed resolutions last December that were in favor of hosting a casino in Saratoga Springs.

Now, many constituents are demanding new resolutions be passed.

The owners of the Saratoga harness track are already planning a \$30 million expansion, including a 120-room hotel, event space and fine dining restaurants. Full-scale casino gaming could join the mix by late 2014 or early 2015.

One of the common issues expressed by SAVE Saratoga proponents was worry that after the Vegas-style casino was established, the city would have virtually no control over what happened with it down the line. Once the casino is built, the owners could sell it to whoever they want, design it to look however they please, and add as many shops, hotel rooms or event space footage as they like.

Jay Ekman, the former pastor of the Presbyterian-New England Congregational Church on Circular Street, said casinos do not have a long history of looking after the “long-term health of a host community,” and Eckman advised the City Council to, “As Nancy Reagan said, just say no” to the casino.

Eckman’s input garnered a hardy applause from his listeners.

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But there were not just anti-casino speakers at Tuesday's meeting.

Several employees of the Saratoga Casino and Raceway voiced their support for bringing a full-gaming casino to the city, one of which said he was there to represent the roughly 630 raceway employees.

The raceway employees pointed out that they were members of the Saratoga community who paid city taxes, go to shows at SPAC, shop downtown and contribute to the overall character of the city.

While no SAVE Saratoga members disputed this point, they argued the city was a home for people – not a commercial venture -- and that the city needs to invest in jobs that will grow the community.

Mayor Joanne Yepsen closed the public input period by asserting the importance of continuing the dialogue on the casino, and said she plans on doing just that.

Check back with Saratogian.com or see Thursday's print edition for more details.

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