

Objections to proposed casino to be heard

Written by Administrator
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PHILADELPHIA State gaming commissioners on Wednesday voted to allow two schools and a synagogue near the proposed Provenance casino to submit further objections to the project, while also granting SugarHouse Casino the right to voice its arguments against issuing a second casino license in Philadelphia.

But the Gaming Control Board did not give the groups everything they asked for in separate petitions to intervene in the selection process.

Commissioners said the three groups near Provenance - Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Friends Select School, and Civics and Science Charter School - could only comment on issues relating to traffic and parking, not security matters.

With SugarHouse, the board limited comment to the potential impact of a second casino on the Philadelphia gambling market.

Commissioners, however, will not allow the city's first casino operator to raise questions about whether three of the bidders for the second license have violated gaming regulations by having ownership stakes in multiple casinos.

SugarHouse and the three community groups must submit to the board by Friday written statements. The board's ruling effectively gives the parties the legal standing to appeal whatever decision it makes on a second licensee. In addition, the board could also permit them to participate in some capacity in suitability hearings.

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"There will be an order later that will outline the permitted role of those granted intervention status," said Doug Harbach, a spokesman for the board.

Beginning Jan. 28, commissioners will hold three days of hearings at the Convention Center to consider the suitability of each of the five applicants for a license, Provence on North Broad Street; Market8 in Center City; and three contenders in South Philadelphia: Casino Revolution, Hollywood Casino Philadelphia, and Live! Hotel & Casino.

At a hearing in Harrisburg on Wednesday, a lawyer for the schools and synagogue, Larry Spector, described as "dysfunctional" some of the congested intersections near the proposed project at Broad and Callowhill Streets. He said a recent traffic study on the impact of the project "tries to minimize the gravity of these intersection problems."

The traffic situation risks becoming so bad that it would put the private Friends Select School, at 16th and Race Streets, at "an extreme competitive disadvantage" with other independent schools, said Colleen Puckett, the school's director of marketing.

Veronica Joyner, principal of the Civics and Science Charter School, located directly on the other side of Broad Street from the proposed Provence, said the charter school is planning a \$12 million expansion on an adjacent parking lot. A casino, she testified, "should not be where there are schools."

Bart Blatstein of Tower Investments, who is behind the Provence project, has held more than 50 meetings with community groups to listen to their concerns, said Michael Fabius, his attorney. In response, he said, Tower has added a second parking structure for 716 vehicles to the project.

SugarHouse, meanwhile, wants to stop the commonwealth from issuing a second license because of concern that the regional gaming market is saturated with casinos.

"We're being surrounded by competition," said John Donnelly, an attorney for HSP Gaming, which owns SugarHouse. "It's not a happy situation."

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But an attorney for one of the five casino applicants accused SugarHouse of intervening in order to hold onto its "monopoly" as Philadelphia's sole casino.

"This is an attempt by SugarHouse to maintain the status quo," said Robert Fitzgerald, a lawyer for PA Gaming Ventures, which is sponsoring the Hollywood Philadelphia project.

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