

Pace of casino openings gives edge to Saratoga Springs, Tioga County racinos

Written by Administrator
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Albany

Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#) 's schedule for opening new casinos within the next 12 months agrees with the operators of racinos in Saratoga Springs and Tioga County.

The governor showed again Tuesday that he intends to fast-track the process, although it could be just rhetoric. In his executive budget proposal, Cuomo said he expects commercial casinos to open as early as January 2015.

In his State of the State address on Jan. 8, Cuomo said a siting board would select the winning casino bidders in early fall and that construction of casinos would begin soon after. As of Wednesday, the siting board had not been selected, and the state [Gaming Commission](#) , which is supposed to empanel the board, has no scheduled meeting this month.

Lee Park, a spokesman for the gaming commission, said the commission intends to follow the governor's schedule and is evaluating candidates for the [Facility Location Board](#) . Appointments may be made, he said, in the "very near future."

The governor's budget plan calls for revenues from casino licensing to begin flowing to the state near the end of the new fiscal year in March 2015 or in the beginning of the following one, according to a state budget official. That doesn't mesh with the governor's timeline.

The Cuomo budget assumes \$200 million from licensing to arrive from the licensing fees of four casinos, or an average of \$50 million per licensee.

Several analysts within the gaming industry and outside of it said if the governor expects a casino to be open early next year, existing facilities seeking casino licenses would have the advantage in getting one of the four upstate licenses.

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"That would strongly suggest that Tioga and Saratoga would be open," said [E.J. McMahon](#) , a budget analyst with the [Empire Center for Public Policy](#)

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"That sounds to me to be true," said [James Featherstonhaugh](#) , an owner of the [Saratoga Casino and Raceway](#) , a video lottery hall and harness track that plans to apply for a casino license. "I like the fact that they are going to stay on this tight timeline."

[Added Jeff Gural](#) , owner of a racino at Tioga Downs just west of Binghamton: "Only Tioga and Saratoga could possibly convert over in a few months; anybody else would take a minimum of two years."

Several of the parties known to be interested in licenses would need to tear down or renovate old facilities, or would have to build new.

Gural and Featherstonhaugh's groups would expand existing gaming halls that offer hundreds of video lottery terminals, but perhaps with a temporary casino.

"We could do something in three or four months; we couldn't do everything we propose to do," Featherstonhaugh said.

[William Walsh](#) , a partner in Traditions at the Glen in Johnson City, which would compete with Gural's plan for a casino, said "high-end" bidders could open the first of next year only if the siting panel would accept a temporary pole barn as a first phase.

He plans a \$150 million project on 500 acres near Binghamton, and could not deliver it within just a few months.

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Winning bidders are supposed to deliver their finished facilities within 24 months of getting a license.

"I assume that any incremental gaming that happens in early 2015 would involve existing gaming — and that won't include me," said [Michael Treanor](#) , who is leading a team hoping to build a \$500 million casino project at the former

[Nevele hotel](#)
resort at Ellenville in Ulster County.

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