

PLAINVILLE — The first construction workers to be employed by the winner of a Massachusetts casino license have started hammering together concrete forms, excavating soil, and breaking ledge for a \$225 million expansion at Plainridge Racecourse.

If the gambling industry is forced this fall to defend the state's 2011 casino law, this ongoing development project could become a star of a political campaign.

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Campaign commercials to “keep the casino law” would practically write themselves, with images of workers pouring concrete — and earning paychecks — at the Penn National Gaming project to expand the harness racing track into a slot machine parlor, observers say. “There’s really no better visual than a bunch of people standing in line at the unemployment office vs. a bunch of guys in hard hats doing work for a major construction project,” said Paul DeBole, assistant professor of political science at Lasell College and a specialist on gambling regulation. “If I was a pro-casino person, those are the kinds of commercials I’d be making right now.” Whether a casino repeal measure will appear on the November ballot is up to the state Supreme Judicial Court, which heard arguments on May 5 on whether voters should have the right to weigh in on the law. If the repeal bid goes ahead, the Penn project — and the roughly 1,000 construction jobs it is expected to create — will be a rallying point for backers of the law, specialists said. Casino defenders “don’t want to engage in a debate about whether gambling is good or bad,” said Stonehill College political science professor Peter Ubertain. “They want the debate to be on a question: ‘Do you want to put your neighbor out of work?’” [Continue reading below](#)

“It’s a smart strategy,” he said. “It’s easier to vote against something that doesn’t exist. It will be harder to vote against something when construction workers are getting paid.” In a preview of how the issue could play out in a referendum campaign this fall, casino opponent John Ribeiro, head of the Repeal the Casino Deal effort, questioned in an interview whether the state still needed to rely on the casino industry to add construction jobs. “We are experiencing a construction boom in Massachusetts, specifically around Boston, without the casinos,” he said. “There are a lot of jobs. More importantly, in the long run, the casinos end up as an economic black hole in their immediate region,” Ribeiro said. “Nothing new is built nearby. You can look at Atlantic City as a mature example. In the long run, there is a net loss of new construction.” Casino opponents have worked for several years to place a repeal measure on the state ballot, arguing that the full electorate should have the opportunity to decide whether to open the state to Las Vegas-style casino gambling. But Attorney General Martha Coakley last fall ruled the repeal measure was an unconstitutional “taking” of implied contract rights and therefore could not appear on the ballot. Opponents appealed to the Supreme Judicial Court, which is expected to decide by early July if the repeal measure may go forward. In the meantime, opponents must collect 11,485 valid signatures from voters by June 18 to keep the repeal question in contention.

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for a spot on the ballot. More than 100 volunteers are collecting signatures, said Ribeiro. He is confident the repeal campaign will gather enough. Penn decided to move forward with its development despite the ongoing repeal campaign.

The company was awarded the state's first casino license in February, winning the right to build a slot parlor with up to 1,250 machines. After paying a \$25 million state licensing fee, the company quickly began construction. The project is due to open next spring. "We're confident that at the end of the day, the message of jobs and revenue will win out," said Jeff Morris, Penn director of public affairs, in an interview at the construction site. "If the law is repealed, all of this stops. All of these jobs stop." Penn officials have promised to run a political campaign to defend the casino law if the repeal measure is permitted on the ballot. The threat of repeal has alarmed other casino companies. MGM Resorts, the only applicant in contention for the sole Western Massachusetts resort casino license, has asked state gambling regulators not to officially award the license to the company's Springfield project until the repeal is settled, either by the court or at the ballot box. MGM officials do not want to be on the hook for the \$85 million resort licensing fee, and other substantial obligations, if the casino law is repealed.

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