

Three years ago, when the state's casino law passed after years of debate, casino gambling in Massachusetts seemed all but inevitable. The fight over where casinos would be built would surely be long and drawn-out. But the time for stopping them entirely had passed.

On Tuesday, the opponents drew an inside straight.

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Suddenly empowered by a Supreme Judicial Court decision that approves an anticasinio ballot measure, activists from Palmer to New Bedford hailed the unanimous ruling as a hard-won victory. "The challenge is to turn the grass-roots network into a unified statewide effort," said Nathan Bech, leader of an opposition group that turned back a casino proposal in West Springfield. Their court victory in hand, the opponents now turn to waging a campaign for voters' support for a ballot initiative that would overturn the law allowing casinos in Massachusetts. They say opponents who fought local casino proposals for more than a year have joined the statewide campaign, eager for the chance to defeat casinos on a broader scale. Repeal advocates expect to be decisively outspent by casino supporters but welcomed a "David versus Goliath" battle. "Once people learn what comes along with casinos, they reject them out of hand," said John Ribeiro, chairman of the Repeal The Casino Deal campaign. [Continue reading below](#)

Repeal The Casino Deal, a statewide coalition of opponents, challenged a ruling last year by Attorney General Martha Coakley, who had rejected the proposed anticasinio ballot initiative as unconstitutional. The state's high court said Tuesday that Coakley was wrong. Casino opponents said the setback of Coakley's 2013 ruling might ultimately work in their favor by redoubling their resolve and bringing more public attention to the issue. "If anything, I think she [Coakley] helped our cause," said Gail Miller of East Boston. At a press conference outside the State House Tuesday, opponents said they had built support for the repeal measure through many local campaigns against casinos proposed in communities across the state. "We fought this from town to town," said Ribeiro, chairman of the repeal campaign. "This decision proves that the people's voice matters." In West Springfield, Palmer, East Boston, and Milford, opponents defeated casino plans at the polls. Other towns, such as Foxborough, Boxborough, and Tewksbury, blocked proposals before they came to a vote. "It's not just Nimbyism," Miller said. "Casinos really impact communities within a 50-mile radius." Scott Harshbarger, a repeal supporter and former state attorney general, praised the court's decision for putting a pivotal issue to a popular vote. "The people have a right to vote," he said. "The people have a right to be heard. That was really the core of this decision." Opponents said casinos bring a host of social ills that would be felt far beyond the host communities, and that message is gaining traction. "The more people know, the less comfortable they feel," Harshbarger said. "This is a chance for a do-over." Joseph Curtatone, Somerville's mayor, said the casino law is deeply

Casino opponents hail court decision putting repeal question on ballot - Metro

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flawed, a “bad hand from the very beginning.” Repeal advocates had assembled a campaign in expectation of a decision in their favor and said the ruling gives them renewed energy. “The inevitability argument [that casinos in Massachusetts are a certainty] is dead as of today,” said David Guarino, a spokesman for the repeal group. “Now it gets a lot more real.” Guarino said the group will raise money for the effort, but realizes it cannot compete with casinos financially. “We know this is going to primarily be a grass-roots effort,” he said. “We like our chances that way.” Last week, casino opponents announced they had more than 26,000 signatures, twice the number needed to bring the measure to the ballot. Organizers said the final push came at the state Democratic convention, where more than half of delegates signed petitions. At the same time, casinos have moved forward. Construction on a slots parlor is underway in Plainville, and the state gambling commission recently awarded the first casino license to MGM Resorts, which plans to build an \$800 million development in Springfield. While resistance has been concentrated at the local level, casino opponents say many remain committed to the fight. “These people are still involved because they know you can’t contain it in one area,” Stratis said. “Now it’s about educating people.” EmmaLadd Shepherd, a leader in the successful campaign against a casino in Palmer, said the court decision felt like vindication. “Yes indeed,” she said. “There couldn’t be better news.” Shepherd, 79, admitted she was a bit burned out after fighting the Palmer plan for years. “I’ve kind of pulled back, but I intend to get back out there.” Leo Allen, an opponent of the casino proposal in New Bedford, said voters deserved to be heard on such an important issue. Three years had passed since the casino law passed, and much had changed. “I think we’re at a stage now where people want to take it back,” he said.

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