

As Casinos Close in Atlantic City, a Push for More, Closer to New York

Written by Administrator

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Photo



The train station at MetLife Stadium in the Meadowlands. A proposal for a casino calls for up to 20,000 new parking spaces. Credit Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

With as many as four casinos shutting down in Atlantic City by the end of September, New Jersey is suddenly awash in plans for, well, more casinos.

The [Meadowlands Regional Chamber of Commerce](#) is to unveil plans on Tuesday for a Las Vegas-style casino, two 1,000-room hotels, a one-million-square-foot convention center and a youth sports center at the Meadowlands Sports Complex, less than nine miles west of Manhattan.

The chamber says that it could be the most successful casino in the world, sitting northeast of MetLife Stadium, next to the planned [American Dream shopping mall](#), water park and amusement park, and so close to New York City.

“We can turn this place into a fabulous sports and entertainment complex with elements for everybody,” said Jim Kirkos, chief executive of the Meadowlands Chamber, which has 1,120 corporate members. “We can really create an economic engine and make it a destination.”

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Similar claims of glamorous, revenue-generating machines are being made by companies in New York State that are vying for casino licenses at locations within 50 miles of Manhattan.

But even as casino fever is intensifying near New York City, in Atlantic City, where the industry

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was once thriving, the picture is much bleaker.

The Atlantic Club casino closed in January; the Showboat casino announced that it would close Aug. 31; the [Revel is to close](#) in September, as is Trump Plaza.

The Meadowlands proposal, or vision, was prompted by discussions among Gov. Chris Christie; Stephen M. Sweeney, president of the State Senate; and other legislators about a constitutional amendment that would allow casinos outside Atlantic City.

This month, Governor Christie announced that he would convene a “summit” of local and state officials on Sept. 8 to discuss the future of Atlantic City.

“We’re happy that all of a sudden there’s this dialogue about gaming outside of Atlantic City,” Mr. Kirkos said.

For decades, there has been a political taboo against the expansion of casino gambling beyond Atlantic City for fear of undermining the 12 casinos there.

But Atlantic City casinos have been battered by the proliferation of casinos in surrounding states, especially Pennsylvania. Revenues have fallen by half since 2006. And now New York plans to license full-scale casinos within a short car ride of northern New Jersey and New York City.

So even as Atlantic City struggles to reinvent itself as a seaside resort and convention city that also happens to have gambling, some legislators, developers and gambling companies are looking to shore up New Jersey’s flanks against more competition.

“You’re losing four casinos in Atlantic City,” said Alan Woinski, publisher of Gaming Industry Weekly Report. “Why don’t you open a casino in another part of New Jersey? The customer in North Jersey is not going to Atlantic City anymore. They drive 70 minutes to Sands Bethlehem

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casino or to Yonkers.”

In July, Paul Fireman, the former chairman of Reebok International, [proposed a \\$4.6 billion casino project](#) with a 95-story skyscraper at the southern end of Jersey City, next to his 160-acre Liberty National Golf Course, a relatively remote location with spectacular views of Lower Manhattan.

Jersey City’s mayor, Steven M. Fulop, a supporter of the project, claimed that “it would be the highest-grossing casino in the United States.”

But proponents will have to overcome the misgivings of officials from South Jersey, where thousands of Atlantic City casino workers make their homes.

In a separate proposal, Jeff Gural, a New York real estate investor, wants to install slot machines at the Meadowlands Sports Complex, where he runs the racetrack and recently built an \$88 million grandstand.

Mr. Gural is not looking to build a destination resort that would compete with Atlantic City. Under his proposal, he would operate slot machines at a 55 percent tax rate, with nearly half of the revenue dedicated to rebuilding Atlantic City as a resort.

“We have to come up with a plan that helps Atlantic City, and doesn’t put it out of business,” Mr. Gural said. “That’s in no one’s best interest.”

But the Meadowlands Chamber has much more ambitious plans.

Its proposal is to build a hotel and a convention hall, a large casino and a youth sports center in a building next to the vacant Izod arena. There would be a second, 1,000-room hotel next to the Meadowlands racetrack.

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The proposal calls for up to 20,000 additional parking spaces in garages scattered across the 750-acre sports complex. In addition, a 1.5-mile monorail or “people mover” would transport visitors around the complex.

“We don’t only want a casino,” Mr. Kirkos said. “I want a convention center, a couple of quality hotels. I want it all.”

Raymond J. Lesniak, a state senator from North Jersey, is not so sure. He said he, too, welcomed a discussion about expanding casinos beyond Atlantic City. Any proposal, he said, had to help Atlantic City transform itself. Mr. Lesniak dismissed the proposal for a Las Vegas-style casino in the Meadowlands, in favor of one overlooking the New York skyline.

“The proposal for a megacasino at the Jersey City site” and a slot parlor in the Meadowlands, Mr. Lesniak said, “could produce in excess of a billion dollars over 10 years to be reinvested in Atlantic City.”

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