

In this suburb a few miles from the Rhode Island state line, construction crews are moving earth, pouring concrete and filling out the steel frame of what will eventually become Massachusetts first slots parlor.

But the \$225 million plan to expand the Plainridge harness racing track into a gambling destination with about 1,250 electronic gambling machines could come to an abrupt halt.

Bay State voters decide Nov. 4 whether to repeal the 2011 state law -- which the Legislature approved and Gov. Deval Patrick signed into law - opening the door for such developments in the first place.

If approved, the unprecedented question would make Massachusetts the first state in the nation to reverse course on casinos. Voters in at least six other states will decide whether to expand or introduce casino offerings this election.

Penn National Gaming, the Pennsylvania company that is developing the Plainville project, says a repeal would mean losing more than \$100 million it has already invested in the project, as well as the end of live horse racing in Massachusetts and the "thousands of jobs" that depend on it.

"This has been a long, long fight," says Jimmy Hardy, a local horse trainer and owner who campaigned hard for the casino law. "We've been on the ropes so many times. We've been hanging on the edge."

With arguably the most at stake in this political fight, Penn National Gaming has taken a leading role in trying to defeat the measure, contributing much of the over \$3 million that casino companies and their business and labor union supporters have pumped into a sophisticated political operation -- the Committee to Protect Massachusetts Jobs.

The gambling companies, which include MGM and Wynn, the two other state casino license holders, say the question is about creating thousands of jobs, generating much-needed tax

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revenue for public services and redeveloping acres of land in some of the state's most economically-struggling communities.

On the other side are local activists organized under the Repeal the Casino Deal campaign.

They talk about the casino industry's "culture of corruption" and the negative impacts to local communities, from more people struggling with gambling addiction to increased traffic, crime and revenue losses for small, independent businesses. Christian, Jewish and Islamic leaders, including the influential Roman Catholic Cardinal Sean O'Malley, have been key figures in pushing this message.

Boston College economics professor Richard McGowan, who studies the gambling industry, says November's vote represents a debate particular to Massachusetts and less a bellwether for the national casino industry, which has seen four of Atlantic City's casinos close this year amid concerns that the northeast casino market is increasingly oversaturated.

"This vote is some ways class warfare between those parts of the state that view casinos as economic development and those wealthier parts of the state that view casinos as morally corrupt," he said.

Indeed, pro-casino campaign materials tout the promise of 6,500 temporary construction jobs and 10,000 permanent jobs once the gambling facilities open, as well as the average compensation of around \$45,000 in salary and benefits. The campaign says the Penn, MGM and Wynn projects alone will to generate about \$426 million annually in state tax revenue and \$55.5 million to their respective host communities.

Anti-casino activists, for their part, appear focused on engaging voters in the cities and towns where local casino referendums have been rejected in recent years.

But organizers, who have framed the campaign as a David-versus-Goliath fight, have struggled to raise campaign funds as their well-funded rivals have been airing slickly-produced television ads for weeks. Much of the anti-casino group's \$311,000 in contributions this year has come

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from a handful of wealthy Bay Staters, including Amos Hostetter, a Boston-area businessman who is among the richest men in the country.

Entering the final critical weeks of the race, the anti-casino camp has about \$26,855 on hand. The pro-casino side has \$67,420, with a new infusion of cash expected from Wynn Resorts, which entered the campaign fray only recently, after winning a state casino license for a \$1.6 billion plan for a Boston-area casino.

As Election Day nears, recent polls suggest the pro-casino side holds the advantage and that there are few undecided voters at this point. But anti-casino activists note their rival's lead has fluctuated dramatically, from as low as 4 percentage points to as high as 20 percentage points.

"We're within striking distance," says Darek Barcikowski, campaign manager for the anti-casino group. "The polling has sort of been all over the place. We're within the margin of error one week and then behind by double digits the next week. One week we're a long shot, the next it's a dead heat."

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