

In Catskills, the Long Wait for a Casino Nears an End

Written by Administrator

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Photo



The developers Charles Degliomini, left, and Emanuel R. Pearlman at the planned site of a casino resort in Thompson, N.Y.
Credit Kirsten Luce for
The New York Times

MONTICELLO, N.Y. — Robert A. Berman is a son of the Catskills, deeply rooted in an era when the borscht belt hotels and bungalow colonies attracted visitors from across the country.

His father, Pip Berman, was a building contractor who spent much of his career expanding the legendary Concord, which featured a 1,200-room hotel and the Imperial Room nightclub, where Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Buddy Hackett, Joan Rivers and Jerry Seinfeld performed.

Robert Berman spent over a decade of his life in a failed attempt to build a casino at the Monticello Raceway that he hoped would revive a Sullivan County in desperate straits, after most of the hotels and the tourism economy had collapsed.

So he was elated this week [when the state's Gaming Facility Location Board](#) selected a developer to build the kind of thing that he and so many others had tried to do for 40 years: an \$800 million resort with a casino, 18-story hotel, indoor-outdoor water park, conference center, cabins and hiking trails on the grounds of the old Concord property.

Photo



Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo addressed the news media on Thursday after a casino resort was approved for Sullivan County.
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“This is the medicine you need to revive the area,” Mr. Berman said.

It was a sentiment repeated time and again on Wednesday night and on Thursday, when Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo arrived at the Bethel Woods Center for the Arts to promote the new project.

Mr. Cuomo had led a campaign to expand gambling north and west of New York City as part of an economic development strategy to revitalize struggling areas, while providing jobs and revenues. After an eight-month review, the location board recommended a casino license for three of 16 proposed casino resorts, one in each of three regions.

“The Catskills were close to dying,” said Scott Smith, 46, a union carpenter. “It was heartbreaking last year to see Kutsher’s close, the last of the big resorts. I’ve always been a little leery of gambling. But I believe that with this kind of resort you’ll see the shops reopen on Broadway again.”

He was referring to the storefronts along Broadway in downtown Monticello that sit vacant and forlorn. At the edge of town, the old Apollo shopping center is stripped bare and rusting. A few billboards for kosher restaurants on the highway nearby fight for attention with ads for a Harley-Davidson motorcycle shop. Sullivan County’s unemployment and poverty rates remain stubbornly above the state average.

The developers of the resort on 1,700 acres of the Concord property hope to break ground within three months. They must complete an environmental review, undergo a background check by the State Police and get final approval from the State Gaming Commission.

“We’re committed to getting this done,” said Emanuel R. Pearlman, chairman of Empire Resorts, which will build the casino. “We have fully committed financing and our environmental review is done.”

Empire Resorts will erect the Montreign Resort Casino and a 391-room hotel. Its partner, EPR Properties, will build the Adelaar Resort, with a water parks, retail shops, cabins, a movie theater, hiking and biking trails and zip lines.

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“We’re part of a resort; we’re not just about gaming,” Mr. Pearlman said. “Given all the concern about casino saturation, we think there’s a greater likelihood of success because of all the other things around the casino.”

Mr. Pearlman said the resort would be working closely with the Monticello Motor Club, a private racetrack, and Bethel Woods, a performance site, to enhance tourism in the area.

Still, the Catskills are roughly the same distance from New York City — with its 8.3 million residents and 52 million annual tourists a year — as rival Pennsylvania casinos in the Poconos, Bethlehem and Philadelphia. And New Jersey legislators are debating whether to put a casino in the Meadowlands.

“Casinos in the Catskills will have a challenge,” said Alex Bumazhny, an analyst for Fitch Ratings, “because the Northeast is pretty saturated.”

But Mr. Pearlman said his business model relied on the 1.8 million adults who live within 60 miles of the Concord, and not a huge stream of business from New York City.

The Concord tract lies in Thompson, just outside Monticello. The hotel was demolished years ago, the tennis courts plowed under and the swimming pools filled in. The new casino will rise where an abandoned bungalow colony now sits.

During its heyday from 1940 through the 1960s, tens of thousands of people packed into the borscht belt’s 500 hotels, 1,000 rooming houses and 50,000 bungalows. Many were working-class and middle-class families, mostly Jewish, from New York City seeking a respite from the summer heat.

The Concord and Grossinger’s, in Liberty, were the best known, in part because of the performers who would take the stage.

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But the Catskills were undone by the advent of cheap airfares in the 1970s, and the popularity of European vacations. One hotel after another closed over the following decades. The Concord, whose roots went back to the 1930s, filed for bankruptcy in 1997 and was later torn down.

Some elected officials, hotel owners and developers tried and failed to persuade state legislators that commercial casinos were the path to survival.

In the mid-1990s, Robert Berman bought the crumbling Monticello racetrack with plans to give 30 acres of land to an Indian tribe, who could then legally build a casino. In 2000, Mr. Berman and the St. Regis Mohawk tribe got preliminary federal approval for a casino. But Caesars Entertainment, then the largest casino company, lured away the tribe, telling the Mohawk chiefs it could get approval for a casino at Kutsher's.

Neither project moved forward. Nor did a plan by Louis R. Cappelli, a developer, to build a casino at the Concord with the Mohegan tribe.

"We finally reached the golden carrot that's been dangling in front of us for so long," said Anthony P. Cellini, the town supervisor of Thompson for 20 years before he retired last year. "We're going to be back as the hospitality capital of the Northeast. This is not a cure-all, but it's a huge stop in the right direction."

The prospect of a casino-resort under Andrew Cuomo's administration prompted a 32-year old memory for Mr. Berman. He recalled his father, who was dying of cancer, asking him to attend a groundbreaking in Fallsburg in the early 1980s. At the event, he was excited to get to shake the hand of a then first-term governor, Mario M. Cuomo.

Mr. Berman said that in his speech, Governor Cuomo "gave his word that he would see the Catskills revitalized through casino gambling and that Atlantic City would not stand alone."

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