

Cuomo backs S. Tier casino, asks for reopened bidding

Written by Administrator

Sunday, 28 December 2014 02:57 -



Gov. Andrew Cuomo talks during a cabinet meeting at the Capitol on Wednesday in Albany. (Photo: Associated Press)

Story Highlights

- Gaming officials should accept applications for new casino in "true Southern Tier," Cuomo wrote.
- "He's going to go to bat for the Southern Tier," Sen. Thomas Libous, R-Binghamton, said of the news.
- Cuomo said he will turn his attention to Southern Tier's economy in 2015.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo is urging the state Gaming Commission to reopen bidding for a casino in the Southern Tier, saying the area would benefit from the development.

In a letter late Friday to the commission and the casino siting board, Cuomo said the officials should start a process to accept new applications for the fourth and final casino license in the "true Southern Tier" after the region was passed over Dec. 17 for a facility in the Finger Lakes.

"Indeed, as this would be the last license issued in New York state, it may excite national competition by interested parties that submit even better applications than the first round," Cuomo wrote.

"If you agree to this request, the (casino board) should quickly establish a process for the fourth license that could be complete as expeditiously as possible, as the Southern Tier needs jobs and investment now," Cuomo wrote in the letter, obtained by Gannett's Albany Bureau.

Cuomo's letter comes after increased pressure from local leaders after two casino applicants in

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the Southern Tier — Tioga Downs in Nichols and Traditions resort in the Town of Union, Broome County — lost to a casino proposal in Tyre, Seneca County, more than one hour away.

The casino picks were made at the Capitol [on the same day](#) Cuomo and his administration said the state would ban hydraulic fracturing for natural gas, saying the health risks outweighed the potential economic benefit. The Southern Tier sits over the gas-rich Marcellus Shale, and the area would have been the prime spot in New York for fracking.

Cuomo's intervention into the casino debate comes after he repeatedly said he would stay clear of the Gaming Facility Location Board, saying the decisions would be left solely up to the board. And board chairman Kevin Law stressed after the picks were made that it had no plans to issue the fourth license.

But the Gaming Commission is under Cuomo's authority as a state agency, and his letter will likely have influence with the panel. The letter was written to Law and Mark Gearan, president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges in the Finger Lakes, whom Cuomo appointed this year as chairman of the Gaming Commission.

"We have received the letter and are reviewing it," said Lee Park, a spokesman for the commission and the board.

In his letter, Cuomo said he and the legislature established the casino law last year to allow for up to four licenses in three areas of the state in need of economic development: the Southern Tier, Albany area and the Catskills.

He noted that the Southern Tier region, because of gambling exclusivity afforded Native American tribes around it, allowed for a small portion of the zone to include a part of the Finger Lakes that extended north to Lake Ontario.

"This portion of land became eligible for a casino, despite being hundreds of miles north of the counties that comprise New York's economically ailing Southern Tier," Cuomo wrote.

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He said the Southern Tier needs the jobs.

"While progress has been made over the past four years, through the Regional Economic Development Councils and targeted investments," Cuomo wrote, "the Binghamton area is tied for the region with the highest unemployment rate in upstate New York, and stands to benefit greatly from new jobs and economic development in the region."

After the fracking and casino decisions, Cuomo has repeatedly said that the Southern Tier's economy would be a priority in his second term, which starts Jan. 1. But hours before the casino pick Dec. 17, Cuomo had doubted whether the region would benefit much from a casino.

He suggested he would put a similar focus on the region as he did during his first term on Buffalo, which received a \$1 billion investment from the state. In a radio interview Dec. 21, [Cuomo said](#), "I get that Buffalo needed help, and we did it. And now I get that the Southern Tier needs help, and we are going to be there."

[Reaction was swift](#) in the Southern Tier after its casino bids were rejected. Sen. Thomas Libous, R-Binghamton, and Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, D-Endwell, Broome County, pressed Cuomo to intervene. Libous, who has a close relationship with Cuomo, said he spoke with the Democratic governor directly about the need for a casino in the region.

"It's great news," Libous said Saturday. "He's going to go to bat for the Southern Tier. I'm very pleased with that." I'm hopeful the commission will look to opening the process for that fourth license in the Southern Tier."

Traditions last Tuesday said [it would back](#) a proposed expansion of the existing racino at Tioga Downs as a way to help the chances of a Southern Tier casino.

Tioga Downs owner Jeff Gural [was seething over](#) being passed over, telling reporters after the announcement that he felt like a "fool" after he contributed \$800,000 at Cuomo's behest last year to help a referendum pass that legalized casino gambling in New York.

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Gural said Saturday that the board's decision to bypass the Southern Tier "didn't make sense." Putting a full-fledged casino in the Southern Tier is logical, Gural said, because the closest competitor is Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs, 90 miles south in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

Libous said he hoped Tioga Downs would win the bid, saying it could open with table games and new amenities quicker than another developer.

In a statement, Lupardo said: "We appealed to the governor directly about the fourth casino license for the true Southern Tier, and I'm glad he's advocating on our behalf. I'm eager to hear the Location Board's response to the governor's letter."

Law told reporters after the selections that the two Southern Tier bids had financial questions that made them uncompetitive compared to the one for the Lago Casino & Resort in Tyre by Rochester-area developer Thomas Wilmot.

"It really wasn't a choice between Lago and the other two in the Southern Tier," Law said. "It was more of a choice between Lago and nothing in the region."

In his letter, Cuomo said that by starting a new bidding process, it could allow for stronger bids.

"I am requesting the (casino board) consider approving a new bidding process for Region Five with the hope that a qualified applicant will come forward to site a casino with the fourth available license in the true Southern Tier," Cuomo wrote.

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What's next

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Gov. Andrew Cuomo in a letter has asked the state Gaming Commission and the Gaming Facility Location Board to reopen its casino siting process to allow for a fourth and final license in the Southern Tier. The board's spokesman said it will review the governor's request.

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