

Rhode Island voters to decide fate of casino on state line

Written by Administrator
Sunday, 30 October 2016 08:09 -

Rhode Island's most expensive political race this season will end when voters decide Nov. 8 whether a casino operator can build a new gambling hall next to the Massachusetts border.

The lopsided, more than \$2 million campaign in favor of a casino in the town of Tiverton has the bipartisan support of the state's political leadership and labor unions. Gambling is Rhode Island's third-biggest source of state revenue, and reports have shown the smallest state ranks above Nevada as having the nation's highest gambling revenue per adult resident. Television and social media video advertisements touting the casino proposal are hard to miss.

But to win, it must also get a majority of votes in Tiverton, a Colonial-era town of quaint coastlines, expansive woodlands and just over 13,000 registered voters. Town leaders point to the \$3 million a year guaranteed to town coffers, and an architectural footprint so modest it's designed to look like the town's library.

Opponents are worried about social ills, the casino's long-term viability amid changing tastes, and the heritage of an area fought over during a bloody 17th-century war between English colonists and local tribes.

Casino operator John Taylor, chairman of Lincoln-based Twin River Management Group, said one reason the company first approached the town is because its voters had previously favored statewide casino proposals, including Twin River's failed attempt to expand its slots parlor in Newport.

Question 1 on the statewide ballot, and Question 8 in Tiverton, seek voter approval allowing Twin River to transfer its license for the aging Newport Grand casino to a new casino in Tiverton. Taylor projects the new casino's annual contribution to state tax rolls would be \$50 million, nearly double what the state gets from the Newport casino.

It could be more if competing plans for a flashier destination casino by the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe don't pan out in Taunton, Massachusetts.

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The Tiverton casino and an adjacent hotel would sit off a highway just 400 feet from the border with Fall River, Massachusetts, with aims to draw in "convenience" gamblers from throughout the region.

That doesn't sit well with the Rev. John Higginbotham, whose 304-year-old Tiverton congregation meets in a church overlooking a tidal strait.

"The money that is supposedly going to be earned is going to be on the backs of the people who are most vulnerable: the poor from Tiverton and Fall River and New Bedford," said Higginbotham, pastor of the Holy Trinity Episcopal Church. "People will become addicted. There's nothing in place to take care of these people when they become addicted to casino gambling."

The opposition from Higginbotham and other church leaders has been muted after they rejected support several months ago from two mysterious benefactors who wanted to help their cause. Higginbotham won't name the people who offered support, citing priestly confidentiality, but suspects they represented competing casino interests.

No opponents have registered a formal campaign account with the state, raising questions in town about who is paying for the "No on 1" lawn signs and other literature.

Taylor said he has visited dozens of Tiverton homes to address any concerns residents might have. He said the track record of his company's larger casino in Lincoln shows that it won't be a burden on public safety.

"The biggest thing we heard was, 'Don't mess around with the environment,'" he said. He said the company has since altered the plans to better protect the surrounding wetlands and wildlife.

Taylor is less sure what to do about another concern of some local residents.

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A town history published in the 1970s describes the swampland near Sucker Brook, the same vicinity as the casino site, as the spot where Wampanoag leader Metacomet, better known as King Philip, and his sister-in-law Weetamoo hid from English colonists in the early skirmishes of King Philip's War in 1675. While historians have disputed the exact coordinates of battle sites and the tribal leader's travels, there's little doubt for residents Al and Nancy Cormier that his escape through the area left a monumental legacy.

"That's sacred land. It's Indian land. It shouldn't be touched," said Al Cormier, whose wife said she is a descendent of the Mayflower Pilgrims. "Nobody views this as a battleground of genocide in America, but this is actually where it took place."

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