

Lawmakers consider Terre Haute casino

Written by Administrator

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While talks of a casino coming to Indianapolis appear stalled, lawmakers are considering approving a casino near the western border of the state.

After meeting opposition the past couple of years, the company that had originally hoped to open a casino near Indy has now switched its focus to Terre Haute, just two hours north of Evansville's casino.

The move creates concern for leaders in Southwestern Indiana, Evansville Mayor Winnecke and Tropicana Evansville — just as the casino is working to [expand its operations onto land](#) .

"It would definitely affect our business in Evansville," said John Chaszar, Tropicana's general manager. "We just made a substantial investment into the community. ... Any loss of revenue not only impacts the revenue of the casino, but it also affects the revenue of the city."

Currently there are 10 standard casino gambling licenses, and two for those who have racetracks in Indiana. While this bill wouldn't increase the number of gambling licenses, it would allow the owners of Rising Star Casino in Southeast Indiana to open a supplemental location in Terre Haute.

In 2015 Full House Resorts, the parent company of Rising Star Casino, tried to prompt legislatures to allow them to open a casino in Indianapolis. That plan [received little support](#) , but at the time, they said they weren't giving up on opening a location in a more populous city, where the company wouldn't have to fight with Cincinnati casinos for business.

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On Wednesday, Alex Stoylar, senior vice president of Full House Resorts, said there is "no more plan for Indianapolis."

With just more than 60,000 residents, Terre Haute's population is about 14 times smaller than that of Indianapolis, but Stoylar said the project is still beneficial.

"It's a very different project," Stoylar said. "Indianapolis is obviously a much bigger marketplace, but Terre Haute allows us to attract a lot more from Illinois, which is really the key to all of this."

Terre Haute leaders hope the new casino can improve their economy and stagnant city population, but it would also likely take away business from several other state casinos, such as Hoosier Park Racing & Casino, Indiana Grand Racing & Casino and French Lick Resort Casino.

Terre Haute Sen. Jon Ford, the author of the legislation, amended [Senate Bill 354](#) so that Full House Resorts would need to pay some for the preservation of the West Baden Springs historic hotel in Orange County and to both of the horse racing casinos until they can legally implement table games in 2021.

Even though Evansville is the same distance from Terre Haute as French Lick and Hoosier Park are, Evansville and Tropicana Evansville would receive no additional money from Full House Resorts.

"According to the fiscal, it's very minimal. the impact to the Evansville area," Ford said. "Plus they're moving inland, which should increase their revenue."

In previous years, there has been push back from some lawmakers about the expansion of gambling, but during Wednesday's committee hearing, that wasn't much of a conversation.

In [2015 a bill passed through the Statehouse](#) that allows riverboat casinos to move onto land and for "racinos" to [implement live dealers](#) in

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2021. Former Gov. Mike Pence opposed the idea of live dealers, but allowed the bill to go into law without his signature.

Gov. Eric Holcomb hasn't voiced his opinion on gambling expansion, but his spokeswoman said he is focused entirely on his agenda right now, and she could not weigh in on the legislation.

Regardless, Ford emphasized this wasn't a true gaming expansion.

"I think everybody understands it's using the existing gaming positions and moving them to Terre Haute to be used," Ford said. "So that question of expansion is really not one that came up today."

IndyStar's Chelsea Schneider and Tony Cook contributed to this report.

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