

Written by Administrator
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In a surprise move, rural Tangipahoa Parish — just west of St. Tammany Parish — is being eyed for a potential riverboat casino.

The owners of the DiamondJacks riverboat casino in Bossier City announced Friday that they are considering whether to upgrade their facility there or move it to the Tangipahoa River just south of Interstate 12.

For Peninsula Pacific, a Los Angeles-based company, to make the move, the Legislature would have to make several changes in state law, and the voters of Tangipahoa Parish would have to approve it in a special election.

“This is a long process, and this is only the first step,” Ronnie Jones, the chairman of the Louisiana Gaming Control Board, said in an interview. His board also would have to approve any move.

“We will do what’s in the best interest of the state and fulfill the legislative policy of promoting economic development,” Jones said. “That’s what riverboat gaming is supposed to be about, economic development.”

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The proposal would put a casino a short drive from St. Tammany Parish and Mississippi. A casino industry official said St. Tammany residents who gamble typically visit the casinos on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which are substantially further away.

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Brent Stevens, manager of Peninsula Pacific, has briefed Gov. John Bel Edwards — Tangipahoa's most famous resident — “but that’s all he knows,” said spokesman Richard Carbo.

A company news release said Peninsula Pacific would invest \$100 million in either Bossier City or Tangipahoa.

“Louisianans deserve the best and we look forward to creating a destination that is both fun, successful and rewarding to the community and the state,” Stevens said in a news release. “In either of these two locations, we will be able to create economic development and drive revenue into critical public sectors like infrastructure, education and quality of life.”

DiamondJacks faces fierce competition in its current home. There are three other riverboat casinos in Bossier City and two across the Red River in Shreveport.

The notion of a riverboat casino on the Tangipahoa Parish seemed like a joke to several parish residents contacted on Friday. One wag noted that the river is only 30 feet wide there and is only deep enough for use by kayakers and canoeists.

But the Legislature is considering a change to the state riverboat casino law that would allow the vessels to move onto land within 1,200 feet of their approved berthing site. That proposed change, recommended by a task force chaired by Jones, would apply to all 15 of the riverboat casinos allowed to operate in Louisiana. The gist is that the casino would simply have to be next to the river, not in it.

For the boat to go to Tangipahoa Parish, the Legislature also would have to designate the river as a designated waterway.

Peninsula Pacific has had several meetings with Robby Miller, the parish president. He did not respond to a phone call or text but said in a statement: “This \$100 million investment in our community could create hundreds of jobs and an economic stimulus that would ripple throughout the parish. This project deserves our interest and attention. A quality project like this

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could also provide new, much-needed revenue for our schools, infrastructure, and drainage programs.”

Daniel Edwards, the sheriff and the governor’s younger brother, said the company has briefed him on the plan.

“I’m not taking a position one way or the other,” Sheriff Edwards said. “I’m not anti-gaming or pro-gaming. The voters can make up their own minds.”

State Sen. Beth Mizell, R-Franklinton, represents a rural portion of Tangipahoa Parish. She had heard about the proposal only from others.

“By and large, they’ve been known to be pretty conservative about gambling,” she said about her constituents.

State Sen. Bodi White, R-Central, who also represents Tangipahoa Parish, did not return a phone call or text.

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