

Arkansas Racing Commission adopts casino gaming rules

Written by Administrator

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On Thursday, the Arkansas State Racing Commission approved more than 300 pages of rules and regulations that will govern casino gaming in the Natural State. (Photo: KATV)

LITTLE ROCK (KATV) —

Pope County residents opposed to a casino in Russellville are breathing a collective sigh of relief - at least for now. The Arkansas State Racing Commission adopted its casino gaming rules on Thursday, including one that effectively stops plans already in place to build a casino in the River Valley.

Thursday's meeting was an in-person public comment session for input on the Racing Commission's draft casino rules. The Commission had already received 194 written public comments - 188 of which pertained to the issue of a Pope County casino.

"The will of Pope County was spoken at the polls on this issue," said Pope County Judge Ben Cross, addressing commissioners on Thursday. "As their representative, I'm just here to re-clarify that's where we stand on the issue."

Both Cross and Russellville Mayor Richard Harris reiterated that neither have any plans to issue letters of support for casino operator applicants in Pope County. But the rules adopted by the commission on Thursday make a letter of support from at least one of them necessary for a casino operator to submit a qualified application.

Mississippi-based Gulfside Casino Partnership had already obtained letters of support from now former Pope County Judge Jim Ed Gibson and former Russellville Mayor Randy Horton. In turn the group had announced plans to build a \$250 million casino-resort in Russellville, but now it appears those letters won't count.

"If the purpose of the amendment is to issue four licenses, one in Pope County, then I think that any rule that frustrates that purpose has problems constitutionally," said Casey Castleberry, attorney for Gulfside.

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"We've satisfied what the amendment requires," Castleberry told commissioners. "If this commission tries to add another caveat to the requirements of that amendment, then that's what I believe to be problematic."

Following the commission's vote on the rule, Castleberry told KATV that Gulfside still intends to submit an application for a casino license in Pope County. Castleberry said he expects the application to be rejected, and from there he said they'll bring the issue to court on the grounds that the Racing Commission is violating the state constitution.

"With all due respect, it's crystal clear that Pope County doesn't want this," said Johnson County Judge Herman Houston.

Houston and Brian Eisele, CEO of the Clarksville Regional Economic Development Organization proposed a quick fix to the Pope County casino debacle - moving the casino roughly 15 miles away to Johnson County. Despite not being a drinker or gambler, Judge Houston said his county needs the jobs, especially after a plant announced they're closing up shop just the other week.

State Representative Aaron Pilkington (R-Clarksville) represents parts of both Pope and Johnson counties. Pilkington spoke about legislation he's had crafted to amend Amendment 100 in order to facilitate the move from Pope County - legislation that would require a two-thirds vote in both the House and Senate.

While opinions differ, most legal experts say Arkansas Supreme Court case law suggests that changes to the state constitution must be voted on by the people, and not simply enacted by the legislature.

Racing Commission rules must be approved by the Legislative Review Committee - that's scheduled to happen on Monday, February 25.

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