
Properties along Interstate 95 draw interest as lawmakers consider constitutional amendment

[DeAnn Komanecy](#) | Savannah Morning News

Playing blackjack, a hand or two of poker, or maybe taking a chance on a slot machine payday could be a near-future reality in Coastal Georgia.

The Georgia Legislature is considering a bill that could ultimately lead to the legalization of casino gambling in the state. Meanwhile, real estate professionals are marketing potential sites in Savannah, Midway and Kingsland for casino resorts.

Atlanta developer Richard Lackey of City Commercial Real Estate, said he has the exclusive listings of a combined 5,000 acres for properties in or near those municipalities. He also claims "three name-brand casino operators" have expressed interest in locating a resort along the Georgia coast.

Savannah stands as the most marketable because "the intersection of I-95 and I-16 clocks traffic counts second only to Atlanta intersections," according to Lackey, whose company helped develop The Battery, a mixed-use complex in Cobb County that includes the Atlanta Braves' Truist Park.

Specific Savannah-area sites remain closely guarded secrets. The lawmaker sponsoring the casino gambling legislation, Rep. Ron Stephens (R-Savannah) referenced the Interstate 95 corridor in a discussion in December. He specifically mentioned Port Wentworth.

Proposed sites are unlikely to be within the Savannah city limits, as several members of Savannah City Council have voiced opposition to casinos. Pooler, Bloomingdale, Garden City, unincorporated Chatham County and Port Wentworth all abut portions of I-95 or I-16.

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Farther south along I-95, the Midway casino site is public knowledge. The property is to the east of I-95 at exit 76 off of Ga. 84/Islands Parkway and is shown on a conceptual plan that describes what could be built on the 170-acre site.

The site plan includes a casino, hotels, movie theater, a live music area, townhomes, a senior living facility, a convention hall, a lake (existing), active adult cottages, workforce housing, community park, community center and recreation facilities.

As for Kingsland, located just three miles north of the Georgia-Florida line, the city's proximity to Jacksonville, Fla. makes it attractive to casino operators, Lackey said. The proposed site is a 400-acre tract at I-95's exit 3.

"The Kingsland site offers access to Jacksonville and its amenities including an international airport," Lackey said.

Lackey said casino owners/operators have several criteria for a good site location for a casino resort.

"It has to be a minimum of 100 upland acres, close to an exit ramp, and visible from Interstate 95," Lackey said. "They also want it near a state line."

The sites should be easily reachable by car for those who live in major population centers, he added.

Lackey notes the population within a two-hour drive for the three Coastal Georgia sites is up to 5 million and within a five-hour drive the population is between 30 and 35 million.

Developers are exploring at least three sites beyond Coastal Georgia for potential casinos. One is at the Atlanta Motor Speedway complex in Henry County, approximately 30 minutes south of Atlanta.

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The [others](#) are along the Savannah River in Hartwell, off Interstate 85, and the Chattahoochee River near Columbus. Lackey is connected to both of those proposed projects.

Legislators' take on casinos

Don't expect developers to break ground on casino resorts anytime soon.

Legalization is a long and difficult process and is just now starting the Georgia General Assembly. Savannah's Stephens has introduced a bill calling for a constitutional amendment, which requires more than just a majority vote for initial approval.

Two-thirds of legislators — 126 representatives in the Georgia House and 37 members of the Georgia Senate — must vote in favor for a constitutional amendment to be written. The measure must also be blessed by the governor and then is placed on the ballot as a statewide voter referendum.

Should the constitutional amendment receive approval this legislative session, it would go on the ballot for the 2022 general election. Should the amendment win statewide approval in November 2022, voters in municipalities where the casino resorts would be located would have to approve it via referendum as well, meaning full approval for a casino on a specific site won't happen until 2023 at the earliest.

Local Georgia House members have adopted a cautious tone on the casino issue.

Rep. Derek Mallow (D-Savannah) said he wants to hear from his constituents..

"I'm not personally a gambler," Mallow said. "And I have a strong faith, but I'm going to listen to the constituents as to what they think."

Mallow, who is in his first term as a state elected official, said he is encouraging people to let

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him know their opinion.

"I will vote for the majority," Mallow said. "I can put my faith to the side and hear the will of the people."

Mallow said it's also important for him to hear from the city of Savannah.

"I'm really looking for direction," Mallow said. "If they would pass a resolution it would help."

Rep. Jesse Petrea (R-Savannah) said he does not support casino gambling.

The state representative for Midway, Al Williams (D-Midway), told Lackey the answer is up to the voters.

"Change is inevitable and there are a lot of things I thought I would never see in Georgia that I have lived long enough to see," said Williams. "We have to believe enough in the people to give them the right to decide."

The 'experts'

A check of numerous articles, scholarly publications, gambling and anti-gambling publications present some opposing views on the impact of casinos.

One thing most agree on is that casinos do add jobs and tend to increase pay.

Casinos also can be a drain on nearby businesses as most going to casinos do not spend money outside of the casino.

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Global Gaming Business Magazine reported in May of 2020 that commercial casinos in the United States generated \$41.7 billion in gaming revenue in 2018, up 3.46% from the previous year, for the highest-ever annual total.

The pandemic has taken a toll on casinos, but most are back open and operating.

Those gaming halls paid \$9.7 billion in taxes to state and local governments.

Last session: [Legalized gambling fails to reach finish line again in General Assembly](#)

David Frun, a former assistant to President George W. Bush, offered another viewpoint in a recent CNN interview, saying casinos "prey on the Americans who can least afford to lose money."

Frun also points to a 2013 report from the National Association of Realtors that the impact of casinos on local property values is "unambiguously" negative.

"Casinos do not revive local economies. They act as parasites upon them. Communities located within 10 miles of a casino exhibit double the rate of problem gambling. Unsurprisingly, such communities also suffer higher rates of home foreclosure and other forms of economic distress and domestic violence," he said.

The Institute for American Values reports that now that casinos are in many states, not just Nevada or New Jersey, the games and players have changed.

Modern casino gambling now is computer gambling designed to keep people playing until their available money is gone.

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IAV also noted that today's gamblers are typically low-income workers or retirees.

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