

Casino plan wins key approval in Shippensburg Township

Written by Administrator
Saturday, 03 April 2021 15:38 -

SHIPPENSBURG - Shippensburg Township supervisors voted 3-0 Saturday to grant conditional use approval to permit Greenwood Gaming and Entertainment to move forward with [a long-dormant plan to develop a Parx casino off Interstate 81 in the west end of Cumberland County.](#)

The proposed 77,572-square-foot casino and restaurant would occupy a little more than half of the former Lowe's store in the Shippen Towne Center retail complex between Walnut Bottom Road and Route 11. Under current plans, another 62,000 square feet of space is being held back for related uses, like retail shopping.

Parx proposes to fill the Lowe's site with 600 slot machines, as well as a nationally-branded restaurant / sports bar with seating for about 250. Projected hours are 9 a.m. through midnight Monday through Thursday, with the casino then operating around the clock from 9 a.m. Friday through midnight Sunday.

Tentative plans call for the casino to open sometime in 2022.

Parx has projected that the casino, upon completion, will provide about 125 full- and part-time jobs (coming to about 100 full-time equivalent positions, according to project submissions) with salaries for the full-timers averaging above \$40,000, plus benefits. That jobs total does not include the additional employment from the tenant restaurant.

Thomas Bonner, general counsel for Parx - whose flagship casino is located in Bensalem, Bucks County, said the company will hold local job fairs and try to recruit as many employees as it can from the surrounding area.

Parx has estimated the annual economic impact from the casino at \$43 million.

The project moved forward with no outright public opposition from the handful of residents who attended Saturday's hearing, though one questioner, Michelle Carey, did pepper developers

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and township supervisors with questions about plans for police presence at the site, especially in the case of a life-threatening emergency like an active shooter incident.

Because the Shippensburg project is set to be licensed as one of the state's smaller Category IV, or satellite, casinos, the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board is not expected to require a permanent, round-the-clock presence by Pennsylvania State Police, as it does at the state's larger, commercial casinos.

That means calls at the Shippensburg casino will be the primary responsibility of the general state police complements operating out of stations in Carlisle and, if needed, Chambersburg. That could bring delays in response time when those barracks are busy with calls in other parts of their respective coverage areas.

But in practice, Supervisor Steve Oldt noted after the meeting, state police already have mutual aid agreements with the neighboring municipal police agencies - including departments in neighboring Shippensburg Borough and Shippensburg University - that would see their officers respond in the case of an emergency.

Shippensburg Township did use to partner with Shippensburg Borough in the Mid-Cumberland Valley Regional Police, but that joint project was disbanded in 2001 after township officials said they felt they were paying too much for the typical level of service needed. Many of the township's calls then were generated by underage drinking or noise complaints related to the large numbers of Shippensburg University students living off-campus in the township.

Some, like Carey, wonder if the opening of a casino open around-the-clock on weekends and till midnight each weeknight might not be a game-changer.

Bonner said Saturday his team is weighing an approach to Shippensburg Borough for direct police service at the casino. But he stressed those discussions are "a glimmer in the eye right now" and he was not promising that anything will happen.

"We will be having discussions with both the township and the state police about what's

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appropriate once we get into operation and it's tough to predict right now what the outcome might be," Bonner said.

He noted Parx will maintain its own round-the-clock security on-site, with officers posted at every entrance and a surveillance system that "sees virtually every part of the building, both front of house and back of house." There are also roving security patrols moving through the parking lots on an ongoing basis.

"We're going to make sure that our property is safe and secure once we open it," Bonner said, "I'd like to think it's one of the safest places you can be."

The supervisors' approval was expected, but it has been a long time coming.

Movement on the Shippensburg project has been held up for nearly two years, after [Parx walked away from a different site right off Interstate 81's Exit 29 interchange](#) because of sinkhole issues and concerns about sharing an access road with tractor-trailers headed to the nearby distribution center.

After a renewed search, the company settled on the former Lowe's building last year, but then got stuck in a dispute with the state Department of Transportation over the scope of a traffic impact study on the new site, which Parx was worried could leave it on the hook for major traffic improvements at the I-81 interchange even though they are now about one mile away.

Gaming industry analysts have said from the start that easy highway access would likely be a key feature in attracting interest from casino operators in the state's new licenses for intentionally-small satellites.

That dispute was eased this winter, when Parx and the Gaming Control Board reached agreement on a revised traffic study plan taking in the larger geographic area, but guarantees the casino company will only be charged for recommended future road improvements according to the share of increased traffic its site accounts for.

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During Saturday's hearing, project engineer Bill Kick testified that vehicle traffic in and out of the casino site will never exceed peak traffic volumes generated by the former Lowe's store. As such, the developers said, they don't see a need for any immediate road improvements to make the project happen.

From a land use perspective, the project meets all other requirements public utility service, parking, fire truck access and distance from protected classes of properties, like residential neighborhoods, churches or schools.

Oldt, chairman of the township's board of supervisors and an open supporter of the casino project, said he is pleased with the chance to get a new tenant for the Lowe's building, which has been empty since February 2019, and looking forward to its economic benefits, including annual payments to the township as a host municipality.

The casino is projected to raise about \$1.8 million in direct host community payments to Shippensburg Township and Cumberland County.

Oldt noted that with Shippensburg University's campus taking about 65 percent of township's land mass off the tax rolls, the addition to the local property tax base and the host fee that Parx will pay the township will be a tremendous help to its residential taxpayers.

"The dollars for us, if we can put this thing to bed with a casino, will be a real win," Oldt said in an interview last month. "I can now fund the fire department. I can fund the EMS. I can not worry about trying to go out there and figure out how much taxes we've got coming in. Because we'll be able to benefit the community."

The state's Category IV casinos were authorized in [the massive gambling expansion package agreed to by Gov Tom Wolf and state lawmakers in 2017](#).

They are intended as intentionally small casinos designed for second-tier markets that are seen as outside the primary markets of the state's original 12 commercial casinos.

By law, these casinos are permitted to have between 300 and 750 slot machines and up to 30

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table games.

Next up for the Parx project is a public hearing on the state license, which has been tentatively scheduled for May 20 at the H. Ric Luhrs Performing Arts Center in Shippensburg.

Read more <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2021/04/casino-plan-wins-key-approval-in-shippensburg-township.html>