

Could a concert venue across the street from the Encore Casino hurt Boston-area theaters?

Written by Administrator

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The state law prevents entertainment venues ranging in size from 1,000 to 3,500 seats from being built in casinos. But Wynn plans to build the venue across the street from the Encore property and bring in a separate business, most likely Big Night Entertainment Group, to operate it. And Wynn says the venue will operate without a subsidy from the casino.

Mid-sized theater businesses still fret they will face unfair competition, particularly after Wynn held some shows in the casino ballroom before the pandemic began.

“We thought we had addressed this early on when they passed the legislation,” said Troy Siebels, president of the 2,300-seat Hanover Theatre in Worcester. “Perhaps it’s not technically in the casino law but it still seems pretty clear that it’s not in the spirit of the legislation. It seems like a way to skirt the rules.”

Siebels said he plans to write a letter to the Massachusetts Gaming Commission by January, to convey his concerns. Many major cities in the state — such as Lynn, Lowell, and New Bedford — have flagship theaters similar to his that could be affected, Siebels said.

Bill Blumenreich, a promoter who runs the 1,100-seat Wilbur in Boston and the 1,875-seat Chevalier in Medford, said he is consulting with an attorney about what steps he should take next. He attended a planning commission meeting in Everett earlier this month to raise his objections to city officials.

“I don’t think it will stand up in court,” Blumenreich said. “The city of Medford and myself are considering hiring a lawyer who is going to protect our rights and make sure the Encore is following the law.”

Executives at Wynn and Big Night — who are in final discussions about operating the new venue — say the theater operators are overreacting. Michael Weaver, spokesman for Las Vegas-based Wynn Resorts, said the events center in Everett would be leased to Big Night, which would run it as a for-profit operation financially independent of the casino.

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“It is our expectation that Big Night will operate the venue based on the same financial metrics it uses to operate all of its local venues,” Weaver said in a statement, “and will make programming decisions according to what it believes will be both popular and profitable for itself.”

■ The Encore Boston Harbor casino. David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

In a separate statement, Big Night partner Ed Kane emphasized the proposed venue’s independence from Wynn.

“The community of Everett has been deprived of an independent event space for decades,” Kane said. “This is an opportunity for Everett to enjoy a first-class, multi-use, independently managed facility of its own.”

The prospect of new competition comes at a tough time for the live event industry, as venues try to recover from a year-plus-long shutdown due to COVID-19.

Coronavirus cases are surging, and shows are starting to be postponed again. And local operators received relatively little aid in the \$4 billion stimulus package recently approved by state lawmakers. In particular, the theater industry sought to create a pilot program for new tax credits for big-budget theatrical productions but did not succeed.

“There are several ... historic venues that already exist in a very competitive market,” said Erica Lynn Schwartz, a vice president with Ambassador Theatre Group, which runs the Emerson Colonial Theatre in Boston. “Especially coming out of the pandemic, it is very difficult to understand how another venue is needed when the already established venues who mean so much to their communities need to thrive.”

Boch Center chief executive Joe Spaulding said he’s also somewhat worried, and he already has a business relationship with Wynn — the casino company is one of the Boch Center’s lead sponsors and helps underwrite some of the center’s community work. Spaulding said he has already conveyed his concerns to Wynn management. He also has reason to hope the new facility won’t hurt the Boch Center, which runs the Wang and Shubert theaters in Boston: From what he can tell, the layout of the Everett venue will be geared more for trade shows than for concerts.

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“I’m hopeful to work with Ed on some shows,” Spaulding said, “so rather than hurting each other, we’re helping each other.”

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