

County OKs building plan for casino - Annapolis Capital

Written by Administrator

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The Cordish Cos. of Baltimore can now apply for building permits for phases one and two of the casino, but still must address traffic concerns raised by the State Highway Administration.

The first phase, expected to be completed a year from now, is a multilevel parking garage adjacent to the casino.

Cordish officials said earlier this month

that they plan to put 2,000 slot machines on the garage's first floor while construction of the permanent casino is under way.

"We are on track for opening a first phase casino in 2011 and look forward to commencing construction shortly," Joe Weinberg, Cordish's director of development, wrote in an e-mail Thursday.

Officials with the SHA, who previously expressed concerns over traffic flow around the casino site, have asked Cordish to make improvements to key roads and intersections.

"The SHA acknowledges the developer has stated they propose to complete roadway improvements that may not be required based on Anne Arundel County's Adequate Public Facilities ordinance," Steven D. Foster, chief of the SHA's engineering access permits division, wrote in a Nov. 12 letter to Traffic Concepts, the Gambrills firm that conducted the original traffic study for Cordish.

"The roadway improvement package presented to date is not completely acceptable to the SHA," Foster said.

He went on to recommend various improvements to the area around the Hanover mall, including updates to the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, Arundel Mills Boulevard, Ridge Road and Dorsey Road.

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Those issues must be addressed before the county issues building and grading permits for the casino, which will hold 4,750 slot machines, planner Mike Murray wrote in his recommendation for approval this week.

"On and off-site traffic mitigation and timing of construction must be resolved prior to building permit approval for a structure containing video lottery terminals," Murray wrote.

County Executive John R. Leopold, an advocate of the casino during his re-election campaign, said he doesn't think that will be a problem.

"This is the first step, the acknowledgement that the applicant has met all the requirements of Adequate Public Facilities (guidelines)," Leopold said. "The applicant has made a commitment to go above and beyond these requirements."

Plans for the casino also include a 300-seat music venue operated by Rams Head, a restaurant operated by celebrity chef Bobby Flay, a Cheesecake Factory, a Ruth's Chris Steak House and a branch of Obrycki's Crab House and Seafood Restaurant. The entire complex is slated to be open by the end of 2012, a year after the temporary casino opens.

"It is my hope that those two timetables can be realized," Leopold said.

Plans for the casino have been in the works for about two years, but the process hasn't been without its twists and turns.

The County Council approved zoning for the casino a year ago after nine months of debate, but its opponents immediately launched a petition drive to take the issue to voters in November.

The referendum, called Question A, was added to the ballot after several rounds of legal challenges. Both Cordish and its opponents poured millions of dollars into the campaign, and 56 percent of county voters approved the casino.

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Leopold said it will bring in much-needed revenue to both the county and the state.

"There's nothing more family-friendly than jobs," Leopold said, alluding to casino opponents' refrain that slots don't belong at a family-oriented mall.

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