

The launch of the 750-machine Casino at Ocean Downs was welcomed by its owner, who is counting on the facility to revitalize his six-decade-old track, and state officials, who have overseen a slots program with numerous setbacks.

Before leading the ribbon-cutting, O'Malley (D) highlighted the 236 jobs the casino has created and predicted that the facility, which features an

octagon-shaped center bar, would come to be seen as "an added attraction, if you will, to the Ocean City experience."

A coalition of Ocean City hotel and restaurant owners initially opposed the project, arguing it would hurt their business and detract from the family friendly nature of the beach town, which is about five miles away.

William Rickman, owner of the half-mile standardbred racetrack, said he thought his casino would soon be seen as "a good addition to the neighborhood."

"I'm pretty confident we're going to be well-received," he said, arguing that the casino would provide something else for visitors and part-time residents to do, particularly in the winter months.

The opening of the casino, which includes electronic versions of roulette and blackjack in addition to newfangled slot machines, follows September's launch of the 1,500-machine Hollywood Casino Perryville, in the northeastern corner of the state.

Construction on Maryland's largest planned casino - a 4,750-machine facility at an Anne Arundel County mall - is about to get underway.

Meanwhile, two other locations authorized by voters in a 2008 ballot measure, in Baltimore and Western Maryland, remain without qualified operators.

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At the time of the ballot measure, state officials pledged the five sites together would eventually generate more than \$600 million a year for state education programs.

The launch of slots followed years of often-bitter debate, and even as state officials came together to celebrate Tuesday, there were fresh signs of discord about the program's future.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller (D-Calvert), who participated in the ribbon-cutting, made a renewed pitch to reporters for putting a casino at Rosecroft Raceway in Prince George's County, including the possibility of one with table games.

Rosecroft, which is shuttered, is not among the eligible locations for slots because of objections voiced by Prince George's lawmakers several years ago.

"Somehow, we've got to get Prince George's County involved," said Miller, whose legislative district includes a small part of the county. "I would personally like to see a facility like this - slots, table games, whatever."

Last year, the Senate passed a bill that authorized gambling on card games at Rosecroft, but leaders of the House of Delegates and O'Malley balked at the idea.

Expanding gambling options or adding locations would also require approval from voters.

O'Malley reiterated Tuesday that he is not eager to move in that direction right now.

"I think we should be focusing our energies on getting the five approved locations up and going," O'Malley said. "That's my perspective."

One aim of Maryland's slots program was to capture the patronage of state residents who are

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traveling elsewhere to gamble.

That seemed to be working Tuesday, at least to some extent.

Karen Lawrence, who was among the first customers when Ocean Downs opened to the public at 1 p.m., said she typically goes to Atlantic City and Dover, Del., to gamble.

Lawrence, who bartends and serves food at the convention center in Ocean City, said the new casino is more convenient.

"Being that I live right across the street, I think I'll come here a lot more often," she said.

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