

Hofford, a Charleston-area builder and entrepreneur, met with Mayor Keith Summey and several city staffers for an update Friday morning, when he said hopes that the boats could be running later this month won't be met.

"It was our indication they were not looking to rush things before they are prepared," said Ryan Johnson, one of the mayor's assistants, who was at the meeting.

A job fair still is anticipated, but down the road.

A final decision on choosing a boat might be as many as 45 days away, Hofford said, adding that it would take several weeks more to get the vessel approved by the Coast Guard and other government maritime agencies.

"Realistically, I'd say this summer will be our kickoff," he said.

Casino boats became legal in South Carolina after the legislature passed a bill specifically giving local governments the authority to accept or reject them. Little River, north of Myrtle Beach, is the only other jurisdiction in the state where they operate.

But in October, North Charleston City Council endorsed the boats leaving from the Cooper River waterfront, estimating they could bring in at least \$700,000 a year to the city's bank account from the various taxes, fees and other offshoot dividends associated with the trips.

As envisioned, the North Charleston cruise would offer slots, blackjack and other casino games once a vessel leaves state-controlled waters, along with dining and other forms of entertainment for the passengers. They would run from a pier on the northern end of the former Charleston Naval Base complex near Riverfront Park.

Hofford still anticipates the trips will offer food and entertainment on board.

North Charleston casino boats wait for summer - Myrtle Beach Sun News

Written by Administrator
Friday, 11 February 2011 23:03 -

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