

Measure 75: Gambling Of Casino Revenues For State Funding - OPB News

Written by Administrator
Monday, 11 October 2010 10:38 -

All this month, OPB is looking the Oregon ballot measures. Today we're looking at Measure 75. That's a proposal that aims to create a private, non-tribal casino to be built Multnomah County. David Noguera has that story. I'm standing in Wood Village, just about a half an hour east of Portland at the site of the former Multnomah Kennel Club. The club first opened in 1933, right at the height of the Great Depression. Back then, many states including Oregon began loosening restrictions on gambling, in part as a way to bring in revenue.

Now, nearly eighty years later, two businessmen from Lake Oswego are proposing a private, non-tribal casino on this site. If the measure passes, 25 percent of the gambling revenue, minus prizes paid, would go to the state.

But unlike the dog track, which was primarily a racing venue, co-petitioner Bruce Studer says this project is designed to have a broader appeal.

Bruce Studer: "Our facility is much more than a casino. It's got two water parks, It's got 14 digital 3D cinema with Imax theater...."

Studer says the actual gaming operations would only account for 30 percent of the casino's footprint. He says the facility would create 2500 permanent jobs as well as thousands of temporary construction jobs

Matt Rossman is Studer's co-petitioner. He says the two began working on the project more than 5 years ago.

Matt Rossman: "We started with the idea of creating an exciting place for Oregonians and tourists to go at the same time creating a revenue stream that would primarily benefit K-12 education."

Under the proposal, 25 percent of the revenue generated by the gaming operation each year would go to the state, a figure the petitioners estimate at \$150 million dollars.

They say Oregon schools would receive the lion's share with the rest being split among, Oregon

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counties, state programs and the Oregon State Police with a small amount going to a fund for problem gamblers.

But the measure itself has some problems.

Steve Kanter, a professor of constitutional law at Lewis and Clark, pointed this out during a recent appearance on OPB's Think Out Loud.

Steve Kanter: "I'm convinced that it is completely unconstitutional to have this measure pass without a constitutional amendment."

The petitioners have secured their own legal opinion that came to just the opposite conclusion. So even if voters do wind up approving Measure 75, it's pretty safe bet any construction would be precluded by a high-stakes battle in the courts.

Opponents also argue the measure would take money from the state lottery. Estimates from Oregon's Legislative Financial Committee project the casino would siphon \$75 million away from state lottery revenues.

The worry is the casino would lure gamblers away from the state-run video poker machines in the Portland Metro area. But petitioner Studer rejects that notion, saying their casino would cater to a different clientele.

Bruce Studer: "It's as different a customer as a customer for 7-11 to Whole Foods."

Studer believes the state's estimate is fundamentally flawed. He also contests similar studies prepared by the measure's primary opponent, the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde.

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They operate the Spirit Mountain casino an hour and a half outside Portland.

Justin Martin is a lobbyist for the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde

Justin Martin: "We're not going to sit here and pretend an aspect of this isn't about competition. It is."

Martin says the tribe is fighting the measure because those gambling dollars fund vital social programs for the Grand Ronde.

He says when the tribes first started opening casinos at what are often isolated reservations, it was with the understanding that they would be the sole operators in the state.

He says a change in the law now would amount to another broken promise in the native people's long history with the government.

Justin Martin: "But it's also about more than that. It's about shifting gambling dollars in Oregon from public good into private profit."

And that hits at the heart of how the two sides differ on the measure.

Martin says a Wood Village casino would sap an important source of funding that primarily benefits social programs in the tribal community.

The measure's supporters say a tribal monopoly doesn't do anything to fix the state's budget woes, since tribal casino profits aren't taxable by the state

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Of course, there's a third perspective that all casinos take advantage of problem gamblers and produce an overall detrimental effect on society.

Mary Sojourner lives in Bend. She's the author of "She Bets Her Life," an autobiographical account of her own struggle with gambling addiction.

Mary Sojourner: "One of the things I learned in my research is that proximity is a huge factor in the establishment of gambling addiction especially slot machine and video poker addiction, so if you can walk quickly to the place you're going to gamble it's more likely that someone with a predisposition to becoming a gambling addict is going to become a gambling addict."

The Multnomah County casino isn't the only gaming project proposed for the area. The Cowlitz tribe of Washington is pushing for a casino near Portland and The Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs has proposed a casino at Cascade Locks.

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