Depending on whom you believe, the proposed Oxford casino and resort will either be: a grand-looking entertainment complex, attracting more tourists and their dollars to scenic western Maine, and bringing much-needed tax revenue into municipal and state coffers, along with 2,700 jobs in one of the state's more depressed areas; or it'll be an economic drain on a hard-hit area, serving only to dupe honest Mainers out of their hard-earned cash, and then send most of it out-of-state, a proposal whose supporters use flimsy and unreliable research to back up their claims.

For Rob Lally of Black Bear Entertainment, the investment group behind the planned casino, it's a project worthy of voter support. "This is really an amazing opportunity for the people of Maine. This is going to provide the economic stimulus that we so desperately need here. The alternative, of course, is nothing."

If Mainers vote Yes on 1 in November, he says casino staff would start getting hired the following day, and ground-breaking could begin by the middle of next year. Estimated tax revenue for the casino, he adds, will be at least $60 million a year, with more than half of that going to fund public education programs.

"Over $30 million is earmarked for K through 12 essential programs and services," Lally said. "I think if you look at one of the passions that we have as a ownership group, education is up there."

"This will not enrich the state of Maine. It may enrich a few individuals, but it will not enrich the state of Maine," said Dennis Bailey of the group Casinos No! "Casinos haven't worked to do this anywhere, this is not a 'destination casino', this is a 'desperation casino.'"

Casinos No! is an advocacy group which opposes gambling throughout the state, on both moral and economic grounds.
Bailey says casinos work by getting people addicted to gambling - something which can have devastating social effects.

He also questions the validity of the economic study on which the casino proponents base many of their arguments.
The study was commissioned by one of the groups supporting the casino and carried out by Professor Todd Gabe of the University of Maine.

Central to the pro-casino argument, says Bailey, is that the project will attract a lot of new visitors - and therefore new dollars - to the state. "That's the only way this thing would add to the economy; and again, their own economist can't tell us, they can't tell us. By their own estimates, they say, 70 percent of their patrons will be Maine patrons. This is not new money, this is not economic development."

A different perspective from Oxford Town Manager Michael Chammings, who spoke in support of Question 1. For him, it's all about jobs. "We're going to be a tourist state, that's what we have for an economy, all the mills are going away, the chicken farms are gone, the dairy farms are gone, the woolen mills are gone. We're vacationland, let's make some destination in this state," he said.

Chammings says Oxford County's unemployment rate, at more than 10 percent, puts enormous strain on municipal budgets - a burden which he says would be eased considerably by the presence of a casino-resort.

Not all Oxford County residents, however, support the casino. Zizi Vlaun of Otisfield, who was not at Wednesday's debate, leads a group of around 160 members, she says, opposing Question 1. She says it's an issue which has divided community members, many of whom do not trust the investors behind the project.

"The other issue is the detrimental effects that it brings to the area - the drunk-driving, the divorce, the suicide rate goes up, the crime, all of the gambling addiction, all of the stuff that we don't need in our area," she says. "We don't have the infrastructure to support it either."

Another leading opponent of Question 1 complains that the proposal is unfair and anti-competitive. Dan Cashman is with Citizens Against the Oxford Casino, a coalition representing a number of interests, including Maine's only current existing casino, Hollywood Slots in Bangor - a combined harness racing and slot machine facility, known as a 'racino.'

Cashman says Question 1 would create what he calls "an unlevel playing field" in the state's gaming industry. "Right now there is one gaming facility and it's in Bangor, and it was voted on in a statewide referendum, it was voted on locally as well, and that facility is only allowed to have slot machines," he said. "This proposal would give table games to the Oxford facility and

not to the Bangor facility or any other facilities that would come in -- they would have to go through a separate set of hurdles."

Cashman also points out that Question 1 would not allow any other gaming facilities at all to open within 100 miles of Oxford - bad news for a proposed casino in Lewiston, and for the planned racino in Biddeford.

This is a bone of contention however: Supporters say that the 100-mile provision is not their fault because it's written under existing state law; but opponents claim that the law was amended by the Oxford casino backers to keep out competition.

For access to more information on Question 1, click the links below:

Yes on 1: http://www.takechargemaine.com
Casinos No!: http://www.casinosno.org
Citizens Against the Oxford Casino: http://baddealformaine.com

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