

Associated Press

WAWARSING, N.Y. — Casino dreams in this corner of the Catskills focus on an empty hotel that had its heyday when families came here in station wagons for shuffleboard, swimming, swanky lounge singers and all-you-can-eat meals.

A proposal to spend at least \$400 million on a destination resort with gambling, golf, a long water slide and more at the old Nevele resort 70 miles north of New York City is supported by people in this bucolic but struggling area who feel it could recapture some of the tourist traffic from the Borscht Belt era.

But in gambling terms, the Nevele proposal is a bit like anteing up before the dealer picks up the deck. New Yorkers will not vote on whether to expand casino gambling for at least five months and it's still not clear where casinos would go if voters approve expansion. The early maneuverings in the Catskills show the complexities in figuring out where to place casinos and how some areas look to gambling as an economic savior.

"It's time for the Nevele to come back and put us on the map again," said Armando Rodriguez, owner of Arod's Barber Shop in Ellenville, a hardscrabble village near the old resort.

The 110-year-old Nevele was one of the big hotels of the Catskills region with swimming, skiing, a big room for comedians and crooners, and — most distinctively — a 9-story round tower of rooms. President Lyndon B. Johnson stayed there one night for a hospital dedication. It closed in 2009 after accumulating about \$21 million in debt. The sprawling complex sits empty today with moss growing in the ski lodge and bits of the ceiling sprinkling the carpet in LBJ's old suite.

An investment group bought the resort from receivership last year for about \$2 million. Their plans are big — a 450-room hotel and casino complex with enough amenities to make it a destination resort. Nevele Investors' Michael Treanor recently stood atop the tower to point out the buildings that would be knocked down and which defining features — like the tower and the "Mad Men"-era lobby — would be saved.

"We want people to walk in and say, 'Hey, this is the Nevele!'" he said during the tour.

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But it's conditional: Treanor said it can happen only if casino gambling is approved and they are in the first wave of licenses granted in the Catskills region.

New York voters could consider an amendment to the state constitution as early as November that would allow Las Vegas-style casinos beyond tribal land. But also crucial is how Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo and state lawmakers decide to expand gambling.

Cuomo wants to start with three casinos upstate, with one possible in the Catskills region. He is negotiating with Senate Republicans who have proposed that three of five upstate casinos be located in the region but only one in the first year.

Treanor said neither proposal would work for the Nevele.

Like many people in Albany and the Catskills, Treanor believes the regional favorite for a casino is the old Concord Hotel about 20 miles west, near Monticello. Veteran developers there have received local approvals for a large destination resort that would incorporate Empire Resorts' nearby Monticello Casino and Raceway's track and video slots.

Concord developers would not respond to calls seeking comment, but they have assured local officials they will build regardless of whether New York voters approve expanded gambling.

Treanor is lobbying to make the Nevele the second Catskills region casino, with approvals granted at the same time so Monticello would not get an insurmountable competitive advantage. The two casinos in adjacent counties would act like anchor stores at a shopping mall, he said, helping the struggling towns in between.

"It's not about us versus them," Treanor said. "The region would best be served by both of us."

It's not clear how that argument will fare at the state Capitol, where state leaders are trying to come up with a casino deal this month. But a long list of officials in Ulster County from the

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executive on down support the project.

Support also was strong on the streets of Ellenville, where multiple storefronts are vacant and the unemployment rate runs high. Many here remember the Nevele's better days and hope for a little taste of that again.

"When you're at 18 percent unemployment, you've lost your industry, the housing market has really taken a hit around here, the potential of 1,500 jobs — it can be a game changer," said Town of Wawarsing Supervisor Scott Carlsen.

"I believe this is the last chance for the Nevele," he said.

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