

Arms full of campaign brochures and colorful maps of the proposed casino near Arundel Mills mall, the wiry man with wavy gray hair is bounding up the block of tidy

homes in Brooklyn, making his pitch.

He skips the house with the "Beware of the dog" sign, but opens gate latches and pounds on doors with the vigor of a seasoned politician.

When one opens, he extends his hand and says, "Hi, I'm David Cordish. Can I talk to you about the slots?"

That a 70-year-old billionaire developer is spending his evenings and weekends knocking on doors like a candidate for the local school board says much about the stakes in next month's referendum in Anne Arundel County that will decide whether Cordish's lavish slots parlor can be built.

Cordish and those who are opposed to the mall project have mounted aggressive campaigns, spending a combined \$6 million so far to influence an election in which up to 320,000 eligible voters will decide the fate of Maryland's largest and potentially most lucrative gambling project.

Opponents of the mall casino project, a group called No Slots at the Mall, have flooded the airwaves with a half-dozen television ads, airing almost nonstop. The pro-mall contingent has also run several spots, and even posted a billboard that can be seen from Interstate 95 in Baltimore. But it's not yet clear which side has the momentum.

Dan Nataf, director of the Center for the Study of Local Politics at Anne Arundel Community College, said a poll he's completing on the issue shows little movement from an earlier survey that found a 50-50 split.

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"I'm a little bit surprised that the pro-slots position hasn't been able to sway more people," said Nataf. "With the economy where it is, with the appeal of job creation and providing a perceived cost-free solution, to not be leading by a mile is confusing."

Cordish, head of the Baltimore-based [Cordish Cos.](#) , is working to win voters one at a time.

Wearing a [Johns Hopkins University](#) lacrosse jacket — he was a member of the school's 1959 championship team — he was greeted like a celebrity on a recent brisk evening just before dusk. Some residents said they had seen him on TV.

Emily Perry, a married mother of a 4-year-old daughter, tells Cordish that she has concerns about going to the mall and seeing slot machines, a message she's gotten from opposition ads. Cordish explains the casino will be in a separate building, pointing to a map of the plans.

"Oh, that makes a big difference," said Perry. "You have to explain that to people."

In the end, though, Perry, who doesn't gamble, said she's still undecided.

By most accounts, both sides have run effective campaigns.

Cordish, through his campaign committee Jobs & Revenue for Anne Arundel County, has won the backing of county teachers, police and firefighters, pounding home the message that the project will bring jobs to the county and much-needed revenue at a time of cutbacks in state and local spending. He repeatedly trumpets estimates that the casino would generate millions for education and create thousands of jobs.

Opponents are reaching beyond their base of supporters who live near the mall and those opposed to gambling on principle, gaining traction with their message that gambling doesn't belong at a "family-friendly" venue like a shopping mall. The group, which boasts support from dozens of community and civic groups, also warns of more traffic jams and an uptick in crime at

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Arundel Mills.

Cordish Cos. and the mall's parent company have committed \$2.6 million so far. The Maryland Jockey Club has spent \$3.2 million, hoping to eventually steer the casino to the [Laurel](#) Park race course.

The efforts culminate on Nov. 2, when Anne Arundel voters, who will also be weighing in on the county executive and governor's races, will decide Question A, which asks voters whether a zoning bill passed by the County Council to allow the mall project should stand.

Voters statewide approved a constitutional amendment in 2008 allowing 15,000 slot machines at five sites throughout the state. But the program has lagged.

Just one casino has opened: a 1,500-unit slots parlor in [Cecil County](#). Plans for a large-scale casino in Baltimore foundered after the company bidding on the license failed to come up with the necessary upfront financing.

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