

Palm Beach County communities question Coconut Creek casino expansion

Written by Administrator
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The Seminole Casino Coconut Creek is four miles from the Broward- [Palm Beach County](#) line. But worries over crime and traffic are reaching beyond that divide.

The casino sits alongside U.S. 441/State Road 7 — a main north-south route between two of Florida's most populated counties. That means a "massive development" proposed at the expanding casino would be close enough to "create significant impacts to surrounding communities," according to the [West Boca](#) Community Council.

The community council fears that casino expansion plans will bring traffic jams, spikes in crime and a flood of pawn shops creeping into southern [Palm Beach County](#) .

"Our concern is the traffic that it would generate. ... We will see more 'We buy gold' shops," said Sheri Scarborough, president of the [West Boca](#) Community Council. "It's unhealthy for a community."

[Broward County](#) residents say they are also worried.

"It's going to be a disaster because they haven't fixed 441 yet," [Broward County](#) resident Patti Lynn warned about casino expansion plans.

Last year, the casino doubled the size of its gaming area and future plans call for adding a 1,000-room hotel, more shops and an expanded 2,500-seat showroom. The proposed hotel would be twice the size of the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino beside Florida's Turnpike near Hollywood.

The Seminole Tribe disputes that its recent expansion or future growth plans for the Coconut

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Creek casino worsen traffic conditions or create other harmful community effects.

South Florida gambling supporters consider the industry an economic development boost and have long disputed that allowing more slot machines and other gaming attracts crime.

Last year's \$150 million expansion of the Seminole Casino Coconut Creek was projected to generate 800 jobs for security guards, chefs, servers, technicians, game dealers and other positions, with more expected if the additional expansion proceeds.

Yet, Broward officials already have been raising questions about the impact of another expansion for the casino complex and the Tribe's push for new federal approvals for the land.

Parkland has called for a more detailed federal review of the Seminole Tribe's proposal. That would trigger public hearings needed to determine the impact of the Seminoles' proposed development on surrounding communities, according to Parkland Mayor Michael Udine.

[Broward County](#) commissioners this month passed a resolution supporting that push for a two-phase federal review — which gives opponents more chances to weigh in on the plans for the land.

[Palm Beach County](#) Commissioner Mary Lou Berger, at the [West Boca](#) Community Council's urging, has called for her fellow commissioners to follow Broward's lead and support the push for a more in-depth federal review of Tribe's plans for the 45 acres.

"There could be traffic impacts," Berger said about the casino expansion proposal. Berger's commission district includes neighborhoods west of [Boca Raton](#).

The Seminole Tribe's plans also involve adding 45 acres that include the expanded Coconut Creek casino attractions and space for more into a federal trust. That would lessen local government control over the development proposed there and also take the land off the tax

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rolls.

While the Seminole Tribe hasn't set a construction target date for the 20-story hotel and other proposed additions, moving the land involved into a trust is triggering community concerns.

The [West Boca](#) Community Council plans to fight the Tribe's request to move the 45 acres into the trust because that "takes the community out of the equation," Scarborough said.

Expanding the casino doesn't necessarily translate to more traffic jams, according to Tribe spokesman Gary Bitner. Because the casino operates 24 hours, guests can come and go throughout the day instead of crowding roads during prime commuting times, said Bitner.

A report released last year by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs estimated that the expanded attraction would generate 521 additional car trips an hour at peak times.

"The traffic impact seems to not be a problem," Bitner said.

Getting federal approval to add the 45 acres to the trust gives the Tribe more governing power over the land it already owns. That process could take years, Bitner said.

The casino expansion plans could proceed without getting federal approval for moving the land into trust. So far the recently expanded areas have been enough to meet market needs, Bitner said.

"There's no immediate plan for any expansion," Bitner said.

The Seminole Tribe proposes to pay Coconut Creek \$2.75 million per year in compensation for the 45 acres coming off the tax rolls and to help pay for road improvements and other measures

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aimed at addressing community impacts of the development.

The development deal with the city also calls for the tribe to pay for added law enforcement services triggered by the casino expansion.

But community concerns extend beyond Coconut Creek, and opponents to the expansion contend that U.S. 441/State Road 7 is already too overloaded with traffic to accommodate the increase that a growing casino complex could bring.

If the casino expansion is allowed to move forward, the Seminole Tribe should have to pay for building a new interchange where the turnpike now goes under Hillsborough Boulevard in [Broward County](#), Scarborough said.

"They need to figure out how they are going to get people to the casino without using State Road 7," he said.

Staff writers [Marcia Pounds](#) and [David Fleshler](#) contributed to this report.

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