

Rival casino firms pour cash into ads - Washington Post

Written by Administrator

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Both are helping to blanket Anne Arundel County voters with TV ads and direct mail, alternately arguing that slots would generate much-needed jobs and government revenue - or ruin a "family-friendly" mall.

Their efforts have turned a local zoning initiative into one of the most expensive campaigns on the ballot in Maryland this year. Companies with a stake in the measure had

spent nearly \$6 million as of two weeks ago - a figure many observers expect to double before Election Day.

"It's eye-popping," said Anne Arundel County Council member James Benoit (D-Crownsville). "I'm astonished by the amount of money they are willing to spend, but both sides have financial interests they're trying to protect."

On Nov. 2, county voters will decide whether to allow a zoning law to stand that is needed for Baltimore-based Cordish Cos. to move forward with its planned 4,750-machine casino on the property of Arundel Mills mall, not far from Baltimore-Washington International Marshall Airport.

State analysts have projected that the mall casino could generate \$500 million a year, making it Maryland's potentially most lucrative by far. About half of that would go to state education programs. The casino operator would keep about a third.

If built, the project would undoubtedly steal some Maryland customers from a casino in Charles Town, W.Va., owned by Penn National Gaming. Meanwhile, the Pennsylvania-based company is poised to push for slots at Laurel Park, an Anne Arundel racetrack it co-owns, if the Cordish bid collapses.

And Penn National is not sitting on the sidelines in the meantime.

Two ballot-issue committees aligned with the dueling companies are spending almost as much on TV ads in the Baltimore market as the state's two leading gubernatorial candidates - who have taken opposite sides in the fray.

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Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) has said he is sympathetic to homeowners who live near the mall and fear a casino would increase traffic problems and crime in the area. "Most of us would rather see it go to a racetrack," O'Malley said in an interview.

Cordish, meanwhile, hired the law firm of former governor Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) last year to do public relations work related to the casino while the zoning measure was pending before the Anne Arundel council. After the council passed the zoning law, citizens petitioned it to the ballot, where it will appear as Question A on Nov. 2.

Ehrlich, who lives in Anne Arundel and is trying to regain his job from O'Malley, has said he supports the measure. "This is immediate dollars and immediate jobs into the area," Ehrlich said in an interview. "If this goes down, it goes down, but there will be no slots venue in Anne Arundel County for an awful long time."

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