

Written by Administrator
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HOLYOKE – Leonard A. Houle may live in Westfield now, but as soon as the Holyoke native heard about an informal bumper sticker rally for a casino here, he got in his Honda Odyssey to attend it.

Houle, 68, put the “Holyoke casino=jobs” bumper sticker

on his back windshield, and said he wants to do anything he can to help Holyoke get a casino.

“You don’t lose the feeling for the place you grew up in. Geographically this is the best location. It’s the crossroads of New England here. The infrastructure is already in place. It’s such a, I hate to use the word, no-brainer, but it is,” Houle said.

The rally on Saturday morning at J.P.’s Restaurant was sponsored by Paper City Development, the group pushing for a resort casino at Wyckoff Country Club off Interstate 91.

Media consultant Anthony L. Cignoli, of Springfield, said he, along with former Springfield city councilor Anthony W. Ravosa Jr., of Connecticut, and Joseph A. Lashinger Jr., a Florida lawyer, compose Paper City Development, which has an option to buy the 108-acre property. A filing with the secretary of state’s office only lists Lashinger as manager of the company.

Cignoli and pro-casino supporters were at the Whiting Farms Road site from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. He said they gave out approximately 100 bumper stickers. Cignoli said they got plenty of encouraging beeps from passing cars, and surprisingly, no jeers.

Even though Palmer in eastern Hampden County has grabbed its share of headlines regarding a possible casino there, especially since Connecticut-based Mohegan Sun wants to build on land across from turnpike exit 8, Cignoli and his group say Holyoke is the superior site.

He said traffic would come directly off Interstate 91, and the current entrance to the country

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club off Route 141 would be closed. The new entrance would be an expense borne by the developer, he said.

Cignoli, along with fellow casino supporter Martin J. Dunn, a former Holyoke mayor and state senator, said a casino would bring badly needed jobs to a region hammered by high unemployment.

They are hopeful the Legislature will revisit the gaming issue by the end of the year.

Dunn said 15 years ago, he was opposed to a casino, and was hopeful for other development. While there have been some economic opportunities in some sectors, unemployment is still an issue, he said, adding a resort casino would bring "3,000 jobs to the table."

"A casino at this point and time makes sense. We desperately need the employment opportunities," Dunn said.

Dunn, a lawyer, said he is working for the developer, Paper City. Holyoke lawyer Aaron W. Wilson and David M. Bartley, former Holyoke Community College president and speaker of the state House of Representatives, also are involved in this project, with community relations and help on Beacon Hill, Cignoli said.

As for what a resort casino in Holyoke would entail, the developers aren't saying just yet, as the exact plans have not been released. In comparison, Mohegan representatives have said their project calls for a 600-room hotel, between six and 10 restaurants, and have distributed renderings of what the site would look like.

Dunn said a Holyoke site makes more sense for Western Massachusetts than the Palmer site, as the location is closer to cities such as Springfield, Chicopee and Westfield.

"I don't think at the end of the day it's the name, but the merits of the proposal," Dunn said.

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While the House and Senate passed a bill this summer allowing up three resort casinos, as well as slot machines at two existing race tracks, it failed after Gov. Deval L. Patrick nixed the slot machine aspect.

That legislation called for a local referendum to gauge citizen support of such a project. Holyoke voters have twice supported casinos in past ballot referendums.

James P. Lavelle, J.P.'s owner, said he thinks a casino would be a boost to Holyoke.

"It's jobs, jobs, jobs," Lavelle said. "GM is not coming here. Chevy is not coming here. We'll take what we can get."

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