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A proposed resort casino in Maine is either going to be the means to get Maine out of the economic doldrums, pumping tens of millions of dollars into the economy and creating thousands of jobs. Or, it is fool's gold, and will undoubtedly bring money in but at the cost of increased crime, drug and alcohol use and personal poverty — all of which carry its own price.

Those are the two sides of an issue before Maine voters Nov. 2, when they will be asked if they want to allow a \$165 million casino to be built in the western Maine town of Oxford. If Question 1 passes, a 14-page law goes into effect that in essence governs everything from the size of the parcel on which the casino will sit to the internal financial controls to the kinds of gambling allowed.

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For more information about the referendum vote on a proposed casino in Maine, visit:

www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/upcoming.html for a copy of the proposed law

www.takechargemaine.com

www.casinosno.org

www.baddealformaine.com

This will be the fourth time a casino has gone to referendum vote in Maine, starting in 2003 with

a proposal to build one that began in York County. Most recently, in 2008, a casino was proposed to be built in the same town. Each time, voters have rejected the measure.

But this time is different, said Robert W. Lally, of Black Bear Entertainment, the investment group behind the proposal and treasurer of Maine Taxpayers Taking Charge, the political action group formed to support the casino.

The primary difference is that all of the investors are from Maine, Lally said. Lally is co-owner of Mt. Abram ski resort; Stephen Barber is former president of Barber Foods in Portland; Jim Boldebook is founder of an automobile advertising agency in Biddeford; Bob Bahre is former owner of both the N.H. International and Oxford Plains speedways; and Rupert and Suzanne Grover started Grover Gundrilling, a specialty drilling company in Norway.

"We are Maine businessmen and women," he said. "I think there's a fear that everything's going out of state. Maine citizens are so used to seeing large, out-of-state companies from Vegas coming in. All of us involved in this are in long-term Maine businesses. We work here. We're not going to flip and run."

They are proposing a \$165 million resort casino on acreage on the outskirts of Oxford, a small town nestled among a number of other small towns on Route 26 near South Paris and not far from Sunday River Ski Resort. Oxford County is one of the poorest in Maine, with unemployment hovering around 10 percent.

According to an economic study by UMaine economics professor Todd Gabe and partly funded by Maine Taxpayers Taking Charge, it is anticipated that the casino would generate \$126.7 million in gaming revenue annually. Some \$60 million is expected to go to the state in the form of taxes and fees.

For Lally, the most important part of the equation is the fact the casino is expected to generate nearly 2,800 jobs — roughly 1,000 of them deriving from additional workers who will be needed at area businesses and around the state who will contract with the casino.

Written by Administrator
Sunday, 24 October 2010 01:10 -

"The most exciting thing for me is the jobs," Lally said. "People will be hired at every level, not only on the floor but in management, advertising, marketing, security," he said. "If you look at this and use common sense, they're going to be spending money in the community as well."

According to the law that would go into effect if the measure passes, 46 percent of all net revenue from slot machines is to be handed to the state Gambling Control Board, which in turn is to forward 25 percent of that money to "supplement and not supplant" essential programs and services for the state's schools.

According to Maine Taxpayers Taking Charge, that is expected to amount to \$25 million a year, of which \$3.7 million is expected to head to York County.

Lally admits the Legislature could amend the law so the funds would be spent as part of education funding, not in addition to it, "but if the people of Maine are clear that this is what they want, it will be hard for legislators to go against the will of the people."

'Bad for Maine'

For York attorney James Bartlett, a board member of the anti-casino group Casinos No, which was formed after the first proposal in 2003, any casino is just bad for Maine.

"It is in many ways a fool's errand seeking to solve financial problems by depending on income from casinos," he said. "Realistically, this can seem to be a very attractive alternative at a time like this; when people think they're going to bring jobs and solve our debt problem. But it's like anything else, it's an addiction. It's an addiction for government because once you're hooked on the revenue stream from casinos, you're hooked. Have you ever heard of any state that says they don't want to do it anymore?"

Bartlett questions casino proponents' claim that jobs up and down the ladder will go to Maine people. "Experience around the country has shown that jobs that pay higher wages go to people from out of state," he said. "The only ones that will go to local people are low-paying service jobs."

Bartlett said it's undoubtedly true that casinos make money, but the real costs can be found in the social problems associated with gambling. "I guess we have to ask ourselves, do we really want to solve our problems using revenue made from gambling?"

At the New England Gaming Summit in Connecticut last month, Lori Rugle, director of Connecticut Problem Gaming Services, said gambling addiction impacts 1 to 2 percent of the population of large gaming facilities. According to published reports, she said impacts of addiction include bankruptcy, unpaid taxes, alcohol treatment, loss of productivity, mental health issues, unpaid debts, foreclosures, homelessness, divorce and suicide.

At the same event, Jim Rubens, chairman of the Granite State Coalition Against Expanded Gambling, estimated that 1 to 2 percent of people generate 40 percent or more of revenue because they play so much.

Increased crime, however, seems to be a matter of interpretation. Statewide crime statistics in Maine for 2009 indicated a spike in crime in Bangor — home to the only gambling facility in the state, Hollywood Slots — nearly triple the statewide average.

However, according to the Bangor Daily News, the Bangor Police Department subsequently conducted its own crime statistics for January-September 2010, which indicated crime had decreased by 17 percent. In any event, Police Chief Ron Gastia said a poor economy and increased drug use has more to do with crime in the city than Hollywood Slots.

Bartlett said another concern of his is the fact "the kind of jobs you want to encourage" won't be forthcoming if a casino is built.

"Study after study has shown that manufacturing and high-tech industries don't want to locate near a casino," he said. "They don't want the potential employee problems. Why add another piece that drives business away?"

Finally, he said, history has shown that once a casino is allowed, another inevitably follows. "It doesn't end. It's a slow creep," he said. "One day the people of Maine will wake up and there's

going to be a number of casinos in the state."

Ahead in polls

According to the latest poll taken Oct. 13, 53 percent of likely voters support the casino and 43 percent oppose it.

By mid-October, Maine Taxpayers Taking Charge raised \$2.1 million, compared with \$180,000 by the two PACs fighting the casino, Casinos No and Citizens Against the Oxford Casino.

Television advertising in favor of Question 1 has been ubiquitous for weeks, while anti-casino ads are just now appearing. But Dennis Bailey, spokesperson for Casinos No, said the polling is not unlike past times when a casino measure has been on the ballot.

"It's always come down to the last week, 10 days," he said. "I don't see it as insurmountable."

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New bid for casino: Referendum heads to Maine voters - York Weekly

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