By CHRIS BLANK

CAPE GIRARDEAU, Mo.

For some in Cape Girardeau, a proposed casino project is a beacon of economic growth for the city's struggling downtown. For others, it offers false promise and is likely to spur addiction and divorce while draining profits from existing

businesses.

Voters will settle the debate next week by casting ballots on whether to allow a casino in the city. It is a decision with statewide implications, as Missouri regulators consider proposals from several cities for the state's last available casino license.

The casino debate cuts across a city known for its conservative politics, essentially pitting hopes for economic development against concerns about immorality and social costs.

Even if residents in Cape Girardeau approve gambling, it does not guarantee the Missouri Gaming Commission will award the city the license. But a rejection all but ensures it will not happen, and it is uncertain when and if another such opportunity might present itself.

"It is probably one of the last, best opportunities to revitalize Cape's downtown, and we think the possibility of bringing over 400 jobs to Cape Girardeau is something that in this economy we desperately need," said Trent Summers, a spokesman for the campaign committee that supports developing a casino.

Critics also express urgency. Many of their objections are couched in religious and moral terms, presented as a litany of social ills: divorce, addiction, crime, depression and home foreclosures.

Doug Austin, a retired marketing director who moved to Cape Girardeau from Oklahoma City,

said he doubts the casino would help economically. Rather than generate more money, Austin fears it would sop up business from local restaurants and bars.

"There aren't no new pennies falling from heaven to be used for gambling ... that money has got to come from somewhere," said Austin, who has helped organize opposition to the proposed casino.

Isle of Capri Casinos Inc. has estimated its Cape Girardeau project would cost $125 million to develop and employ 450 to 500 people. In an application to state gambling regulators, Isle of Capri predicts it will attract 1 million visitors per year from six states and boost city and county tax rolls by $3 million.

The de facto capital of southeastern Missouri, Cape Girardeau has a population of 38,000 and is located about halfway between St. Louis and Memphis, Tenn. Unemployment in the region is high, at 8.2 percent, but it's lower than the state's overall rate of 9.3 percent.

Business has flourished along a highway cutting through the city, where chain restaurants, hotels and new developments have sprung up.

But the city's downtown has struggled, and vacant buildings are interspersed among Main Street's eateries, bars and antique shops. The problem is most evident in the downtown area near the proposed casino site, where boarded up buildings and some rundown houses are separated from an empty field by a road. The casino would go where an old factory once produced shoes.

Summers said the hope is that the casino will help spark the downtown district. He says the key for supporters is to ensure voters know what the casino could bring to Cape Girardeau.

"There's ethical and moral arguments, but from a business standpoint, I think it's pretty cut and dry," Summers said. "If this were a Walmart or some other type of organization, I don't think there would be the opposition."

But it is a casino, and that is a big problem for some.

"For a gambling casino boat to succeed in Cape, thousands of people are going to have to lose millions of dollars," said Austin, who refers to a casino as a "cancerous growth" that would bring a lot of problems.

This will be the third time for Cape Girardeau to vote on gambling. In June 1993, voters defeated a proposal to allow casinos. Then in November 1993, they approved it.

For Cape Girardeau's third debate, the broader political background is a factor.

State and local governments throughout the country have looked for ways to cut spending and trim budgets. The possible infusion of revenue in Cape Girardeau has prompted police officers' and firefighters' associations to endorse the project. The city council has considered how to spend money received for land it owns that is needed for the casino.

"It's easier to say no to additional money when you feel you've got sufficient money," said Rick Althaus, a political science professor at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau. "But when you feel you don't have sufficient money, it's harder to say that no, 'I'm going to turn this money down for broader principles.'"

Not surprisingly, supporters and critics both are claiming momentum before next week's election.

Supporters say they are confident voters will buy into the economic development argument but warn a close electoral win could end up as a loss if state regulators are not convinced Cape Girardeau residents fully support the project.

Critics, meanwhile, claim they are building grass roots support. One even is predicting the outcome: A 56 percent to 44 percent win for the opponents.

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