

Written by Administrator
Wednesday, 22 June 2016 09:53 -

By Jennifer Bogdan
The Providence Journal Posted Jun. 22, 2016 at 9:47 am Updated at 10:30 AM

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Estimates of how many jobs would be created with the opening of a new strategically-located casino in Tiverton have grown to as many as 600 as Twin River Management Group officially kicked off its statewide campaign Tuesday seeking voter approval for the gambling hall.

The issue has been floated with local residents for months. In March, the General Assembly decided to send the question to the voters in November. With Election Day fast approaching, Twin River has launched a campaign backed by several labor and business organizations. During a kickoff rally at Providence's India Point Park, Rhode Island AFL-CIO president George Nee told dozens gathered that they have a unique opportunity to grow and protect union jobs, specifically those of UAW Local 7770, Newport Grand's workers union.

"If this does not happen, I think those jobs are in jeopardy," Nee said. "So from a labor perspective we have an opportunity we don't usually have. We can use our voice at the ballot box to protect our members' jobs and to expand our members' jobs."

As Twin River sought General Assembly approval, casino officials, who are seeking to shut down the Newport Grand slots parlor and transfer its license to a new casino, touted as many as 350 jobs generated. Today, officials are claiming as many as 550 to 600 permanent jobs and another 330 construction jobs.

How did those numbers change?

Twin River spokeswoman Patti Doyle said the estimate of 550 to 600 includes part-time jobs because the casino has learned "that many of our dealers prefer to work part time." Those numbers translate into approximately 400 full-time equivalents, still outdoing earlier estimates. Doyle said the overall jump reflects a better defined size of the casino, an attached 84-room hotel, a sit-down restaurant and some take-away restaurants.

Twin River is funding the the campaign under the name "Citizens to Create Jobs and Protect Revenue, Inc." It has spent \$237,347 readying the drive since March. John E. Taylor, Twin River's chairman, said there is no dedicated campaign staff. Instead, they're using a combination of outside consultants and in-kind company support. Twin River owns both Newport Grand and the Twin River casino in Lincoln.

Previous casino expansion campaigns, including failed drives by other groups to add table games to Newport Grand, have seen significant backlash. Taylor said he's yet to see any "strongly organized opposition." Though he noted that he has heard some people voice individual concerns.

Plans call for the Tiverton casino to have 32 table games and 1,000 video lottery terminals, or VLTs. That's fewer than the 1,097 VLTs currently at Newport Grand.

In the last fiscal year, Newport Grand contributed \$27 million to state revenues. A study commissioned by Twin River suggests that a Tiverton casino — also competing with a new Taunton casino under construction by the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe — will bring the state roughly \$50 million in 2020. (The earliest a Tiverton casino could open is July 2018.)

Asked what will happen to Newport Grand's building if the casino closes, Taylor said casino officials are working with the city, which is considering an economic development zone there.

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"If we don't have a buyer when we are ready to close Newport Grand, we've committed to scrap the building so they're not left with an old jai alai fronton at the gate to their community," Taylor said.

Revenue projections for Rhode Island were initially higher under scenarios in which no competing Massachusetts casinos opened in the region. The Massachusetts Gaming Commission decided in April to shoot down plans for a Brockton casino and instead guaranteed Massachusetts 17 percent of gaming revenues from the tribal casino.

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