

By BRIAN WITTE

ANNAPOLIS, Md.

Maryland's largest proposed casino is in the hands of Anne Arundel County voters, who are weighing huge financial implications for the state and the county in a referendum on a local zoning ordinance needed for the project.

The casino proposed by

Baltimore-based Cordish Cos. would be about 20 miles from the nation's capital beside a large outlet mall and could hold as many as 4,750 slot machines. That's nearly one-third of the 15,000 slot machines allowed in the state.

The site beside Arundel Mills Mall could generate as much as \$500 million a year, with about \$243 million going to the state and \$30 million to the county at a time when both face big budget deficits. The operator would get about a third of the proceeds.

The ballot question has prompted intense campaigning by both foes and supporters, who have spent millions on television ads and direct mail seeking to influence what could be a close vote.

Voters have strong opinions and the subject convulsed Maryland lawmakers for years before they finally decided in a 2007 special session to let voters decide whether to legalize slot machines in a 2008 constitutional amendment.

Melody Brooks, who works in a store in a strip mall near the outlet mall, said area traffic already is a "nightmare." She's also worried about an increase in crime as well as the potential for gridlock to chase away shoppers.

"I think it's going to hurt the people here, because I think it's going to be so gridlocked that

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people are not going to want to come to these places to even shop," Brooks said.

But some voters say Maryland has been losing far too much revenue to neighboring states like Delaware and West Virginia that have had slot machines for years.

"I feel there's a lot of people that are in need of jobs and revenue," said Michelle McDowell, 42, after voting for allowing the casino during early voting in Annapolis. "Why not keep it in the state of Maryland and local so that there are jobs for people that are struggling from hard times?"

If county voters reject the proposal, it's unclear when and where the casino could be built.

David Cordish, president of the company, has been going door-to-door in communities to highlight the financial benefits, which he says include bringing roughly 4,000 jobs to the county to build and operate the facility. Cordish cites a variety of civic and business groups that are supporting the proposal, and he said a rejection of the ordinance will delay the project for at least a decade.

"I think those people who are saying now or never are correct," Cordish said in a telephone interview this week.

Rob Annicelli, a citizen activist and spokesman for the group No Slots at the Mall, said county voters who supported a 2008 constitutional convention to legalize slot machines never imagined a casino would end up next to a family-friendly mall instead of a horse racing track. He also said the casino could still be built elsewhere, if voters turn down the ballot proposal.

"No matter where the casino is built, the revenue will come," Annicelli said.

The referendum already has delayed a full opening from December 2011 until sometime in 2012, Cordish said, although he is exploring the possibility of a temporary facility that could open in four months, if voters approve the ordinance.

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The full proposal by Cordish calls for a 215,000-square-foot facility, including a 125,000-square-foot gambling space. Cordish also wants to bring fine dining and live entertainment to the venue.

While a 2008 constitutional amendment legalizing slot machines passed in the county 149,604 votes to 103,814, opponents to putting the casino next to the mall succeeded in getting enough signatures for a referendum. The petition effort prevailed against court challenges that were finally settled in July by Maryland's highest court, which ordered the referendum to go forward.

Local opponents have joined the Maryland Jockey Club in trying to shoot down the zoning ordinance. They say the slot machine venue should be built at Laurel Park horse racing track, because gambling already exists there and many voters believed that was the likely place for it to be built.

Plans for Laurel crumbled, however, when bankrupt track owner Magna Entertainment Corp. failed to put up the \$28.5 million slot licensing fee, paving the way for Cordish to win the license.

Maryland's first casino opened last month in Perryville off Interstate 95 with 1,500 slot machines. A second slots facility near Ocean City at the Ocean Downs horse racing track with 800 slot machines is scheduled to open in December. Two other potential sites in Baltimore and western Maryland are in limbo.

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