

Written by Administrator
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With a month to go before voters statewide decide whether to allow casino gambling in North Jersey, supporters face a landscape of unfavorable poll numbers, a barrage of opposition TV and radio advertising, and the recent decision by deep-pocketed backers to suspend their public relations campaign.

But many who have spent years dreaming of bringing a casino to the Meadowlands Sports Complex or other locations in North Jersey aren't giving up just yet. Instead, they are getting together this week to discuss ways to get their message out in non-traditional ways.

Several of the state's most established harness racehorse owners have met recently with leaders of the Meadowlands Regional Chamber to talk strategy. A forum featuring the Democratic gubernatorial candidate Phil Murphy and several state lawmakers on Friday is being pitched as an opportunity to gain attention for their cause.

"Not passing this referendum would mean we are giving up \$600 million a year" in new casino tax revenues "that has to be made up in the budget in some other way, like an increase in property taxes or income tax," Mike Gulotta, a longtime horseman and the owner of Deo Volente Farms in Flemington, said in an interview at The Meadowlands Racetrack last week.

Opponents of the casino expansion proposal — many of whom are from Atlantic County and other areas in South Jersey — counter that adding casinos in North Jersey would further devastate the economy of Atlantic City, which voters handed a statewide gambling monopoly 40 years ago but now is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. They say Atlantic County — which in recent years has had one of the highest foreclosure rates in the country — would also be devastated if thousands of additional casino jobs are lost. The closure of the Trump Taj Mahal today will leave the city with seven casinos, down from the dozen that were operating there at the start of 2014.

But Gulotta and other horsemen — like Anthony Perretti, a Paramus native and Asbury Park resident, and Mark Ford, president of the Standardbred Breeders and Owners Association of New Jersey — frame the issue in a way that echoes what Ed Rendell said more than a decade ago when he was the governor of Pennsylvania.

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Rendell broke a logjam in public sentiment on legalizing casinos in his state by making the case that, regardless of one's opinion of gambling, Pennsylvanians were spending almost a billion dollars annually at casinos in neighboring states — especially in New Jersey. The first casino in Pennsylvania opened in 2006, inducing many Keystone State residents to gamble closer to home.

The half-dozen Pennsylvania casinos that have since opened near the New Jersey state line — as well as Empire City Resorts at Yonkers Raceway, which also opened in 2006 — lure tens of thousands of New Jersey gamblers each month to spend their entertainment dollars out of state. New Jersey license plates are plentiful on vehicles at Yonkers as well as at the Mount Airy Casino in the Poconos and at the Sands Bethlehem casino.

“The people of New Jersey are subsidizing the tax burdens of the people of New York and Pennsylvania by gambling there,” Gulotta said.

Racehorse owners also focus on the issue of preservation of farmland that has proven popular with voters in previous referendums.

“There are more than 200,000 acres of equine-related farmland in New Jersey,” Gulotta said. “Do we want that to go away?”

A 2014 Rutgers University study estimated that the state equine industry generates 13,000 jobs of which more than half — 7,000 — are related to horse racing.

Perretti said he hoped to enlist support from construction unions, hotel workers, veterinarians, feed manufacturers and anyone else who would suffer economic harm from a shutdown or cutback in the state's equine industry and who would benefit from increased state support for the racetracks.

The horsemen support the casino expansion proposal even though the state's horse racing industry might receive less than one-tenth of the \$60 million annually in race purse subsidies that leaders say is needed to make the tracks truly competitive with the casino-subsidized

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tracks in surrounding states. They say that the gap could be diminished in the enabling legislation that would be passed in Trenton should voters approve casino expansion.

“The referendum guarantees us a place at the table, and we can negotiate to get a bigger piece of the pie,” Perretti said, though Governor Christie — who privatized the tracks five years ago — is philosophically opposed to any industry subsidy.

Dennis Drazin, who operates Monmouth Park, has been ambivalent about the ballot question.

“We really don’t know where he is at,” Ford, the head of the harness racing organization, said of Drazin. “He’s an enigma. We’re supposedly on the same team, but I have yet to see it.”

That may soon change. Drazin said in an interview last week that he hoped to reach an agreement within a matter of days with Jeff Gural, the operator of The Meadowlands Racetrack, that would allow for the state thoroughbred and harness racing industries to receive \$15 million each of the revenue from a Meadowlands casino should Gural produce a winning bid to build one adjacent to his grandstand.

“The thoroughbreds were depending on enabling legislation that was never drafted, and never voted upon, to clarify how much benefit there would be from the referendum,” Drazin said. “But I am in the drafting process with Jeff, and once it’s signed then we will support the referendum.”

Mike Campbell, the executive director of the state Thoroughbred Breeders Association, said that adding a pair of casinos in North Jersey “will protect thousands of jobs associated with New Jersey’s equine industry.”

The three most recent major polls on the issue show opponents with a double-digit lead, with a Stockton University poll last week revealing 68 percent opposition and just 27 percent support statewide.

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Meanwhile, Gural and Paul Fireman — a former Reebok chief executive who is seeking to build a \$4.6 billion casino and resort complex on the grounds of his Liberty National Golf Club in Jersey City — announced last month that they were suspending their OURTurnNJ campaign favoring the casino expansion, citing grim polling data.

Ron Simoncini, a spokesman for the Regional Chamber, said the organization's "Northstars" campaign "has scraped together a small budget to support a social media campaign and online advertising campaign" — an effort similar to what leaders of the state's horse racing industry are planning via their partnership with the East Rutherford-based MWW public relations firm.

Video footage of residents expressing their support for North Jersey casinos can be used to effectively counteract "the mercenaries being used by the 'no' vote people," Simoncini said, noting that Genting Group, the Malaysia-based organization that owns Resorts World Casino at Aqueduct in Queens, is helping to finance the Trenton's Bad Bet campaign against casino expansion.

The chamber and the harness racing association are among the sponsors of the "mDest Tourism Conference: Press for Yes" forum at the Stony Hill Inn in Hackensack on Friday morning. One panel focuses on the economic impact of a Meadowlands casino, with another featuring Murphy and a number of state legislators from both parties — Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto; state Sens. Paul Sarlo, Jennifer Beck and Joseph Kyrillos; and Assemblyman Ralph Caputo.

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