

Question A: Casino or no casino at mall? - Annapolis Capital

Written by Administrator

Sunday, 31 October 2010 04:22 -

More money has been spent to sway local voters on this referendum question than on the entire statewide effort to legalize slot machines two years ago. While the question simply asks whether to uphold or overturn a county zoning law, the implications of the vote are far more complicated and, many argue, have been confused by advertisements in which

each side condemns the other's ads as misleading.

Several recent polls have shown voters split on the issue, even though competing campaigns have poured more than \$8 million into stuffing mailboxes, roadside signs and airtime with their messages. Both sides held dueling press conferences on Friday to sway whatever voters remain undecided, and both sides pledge to keep up the fight until the polls close.

"It's full-on, full-throttle, knocking on doors, sending out advertisements, robo calls, television, media advertisements, all the way," said David Jones, president of No Slots at the Mall and a Hanover resident who lives near the proposed casino site.

David Cordish, president of casino developer The Cordish Cos., plans to ride a fire truck from precinct to precinct Tuesday to personally urge voters to support his 200,000-square-foot gambling and entertainment emporium beside Arundel Mills mall.

The casino is expected to generate \$400 million annually for state coffers, \$30 million a year for Anne Arundel County, and put millions into the state's struggling horse racing industry. Cordish, whose campaign is called Jobs & Revenue for Anne Arundel County, promises the complex will bring 4,000 jobs to the area and shore up the county's ugly budget picture.

"You really don't want to look at next year's budget and the future years' budget without some immediate casino revenue," Cordish said. "If you want to keep your taxes in check, possibly lower your taxes, you need to vote for Question A."

The pro-casino campaign scored support from county firefighter, teacher and police officer unions, as well as from County Executive John R. Leopold.

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"If Question A fails, it's unlikely we'll see slots in Anne Arundel County," Leopold said. "I'm the only elected official for all 540,000 county citizens. While I'm sympathetic to the concerns of the residents (near the casino), I have broader obligations to the rest of the county."

Jones rejects the now-or-never mantra of the pro-slots camp as empty rhetoric, and said Question A is about making the best long-term choice for the county. He and fellow residents say the casino will bring traffic and crime to the mall, disrupting their neighborhoods.

"It's about location, location, location," Jones said. "The people need to make this final decision on whether we're going to use a long-term solution that will fundamentally change our community for a short-term problem, which is the budget."

Jones said his group has countywide support and would never have been able to collect 40,000 signatures to put the measure on the ballot if its members only worked the neighborhoods around Arundel Mills.

Cordish said he would have won over county voters if the other side hadn't used money from another gambling giant to conduct a "carpet-bombing" on the airwaves with misleading advertisements.

"How do you have a race that's close?" Cordish asked. "I have the newspaper endorsements. I have the police, the fireman, the teachers, the business community. I have everybody, but they have TV."

Other questions

Question A is one of three questions on the ballot, though it has garnered far more interest than the other two measures. Question B asks whether the County Council should have an additional 15 days to deliberate the county budget. Question C asks whether to allow people to serve on the council even if they work for a state agency or serve in the reserves of the National Guard. The County Council endorsed both, but the county administration objected to Question B because it would mean crafting the county's spending plan before local officials know how much they'll receive in state aid.

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The Arundel Mills casino underwent nine months of debate in the County Council before four out of the seven council members approved zoning for it. A citizen group immediately launched a petition drive to overturn it, and Cordish fought back with a lawsuit challenging the signatures they collected. Maryland's highest court eventually ordered the issue to be on the ballot.

Meanwhile, gaming giant Penn National Gaming invested heavily in the Maryland Jockey Club, which owns Laurel Park racetrack, and began financing the fight against the casino. The jockey club, backed by Penn National, has donated \$5.5 million to overturn the project's zoning. On Friday, the jockey club said it was ready to apply for its own license if the process were to start over from scratch. Last time bids were opened, the jockey club failed to put up the \$28.5 million application fee and its bid was rejected.

Cordish, meanwhile, accuses Penn National of derailing Maryland's slots program to protect profits at Penn's Charles Town, W.Va., casino, and filed a complaint with the Maryland attorney general to silence Penn's involvement in the campaign. The attorney general opined the state could not limit the company's right to freedom of speech. Cordish said voters need to keep in mind the fight is about an out-of-state company protecting its business interests.

"It's really all about between Maryland and West Virginia, between Charles Town and Anne Arundel County," he said.

Penn National announced it would be willing to relinquish its gambling license at a Cecil County casino in order to build another casino at Laurel Park.

Horse racing future

Meanwhile, the jockey club has staked the future of the horse racing industry on whether voters overturn the current zoning law. At a press conference Friday, jockey club President Tom Chuckas said 15,000 workers would be laid off and horse racing would collapse if Laurel Park had to compete with a casino at Arundel Mills.

"Why would anyone think it's good public policy to create 4,000 (casino) jobs at the expense of 15,000 (horse industry) jobs?" Chuckas asked. "What sense does that make?"

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At a competing press conference, Cordish scoffed at the threat to close Laurel Park if it does not have a casino.

"I feel like I've seen that rodeo before," he said, adding, "We stand ready, willing and able to buy the tracks and restore horse racing."

His company sought to buy the jockey club's tracks, including Laurel, when its parent company recently went through bankruptcy proceedings, but ownership of the tracks was transferred to a subsidiary before the bankruptcy auction.

If Question A passes, Cordish said it could quickly build a temporary facility to house the slot machines while a permanent home is erected. If Question A fails, Cordish still holds the only license to operate a casino in Anne Arundel County, and state officials have said they will not work to revoke it.

Don Fry, chairman of the state's slots location commission, has said the state will do nothing until the Anne Arundel County Council passes another zoning law to allow for slots and the law takes effect. Councilman Daryl Jones, D-Severn, said among his first orders of business would be to introduce a bill that allows a casino at Laurel Park and other locations - but not at Arundel Mills. Whether it will pass remains to be seen.

Councilman Jamie Benoit, D-Crownsville, is the only other current councilman on the ballot for re-election this year. He said that if his colleague introduced such a zoning bill, he'd "have a fight on his hands."

Leopold agreed that whether the council passes another zoning bill "remains to be seen."

Leopold likes to say that the slots issue in Maryland has more twists and turns than a Bronx cab ride. Both sides agree that if voters overturn zoning on Tuesday, they'll be in for another ride.

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