

## York County casino proposal runs into criticism from lawmakers

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 29 March 2017 21:50 -

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AUGUSTA — Lawmakers criticized an effort to bring a casino to York County during an unusual public hearing Wednesday, saying the company behind the proposal has a questionable history and would be handed exclusive and lucrative rights to build the casino if voters approve.

The Legislature is nevertheless expected to put the casino question to voters in November because backers collected enough signatures to place it on the ballot. The committee's only other option is recommend the Legislature adopt the proposal without a referendum.

In an unusual twist, Dan Riley, a lobbyist and attorney, told the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee that he had been retained hours before Wednesday's hearing to represent Bridge Capital, a company based in the Mariana Islands that is behind the ballot push.

Riley answered several questions about his client, but told the committee he had received limited information before the hearing and would have to learn more about the plan. Riley said it was the first time in his 25-year career he had been retained on such short notice and with so little information. Bridge Capital did not send any other representatives to the hearing.

One of the company's principals is Shawn Scott, who won passage of a casino ballot question in 2003 that led to Maine's first casino in Bangor. Scott later sold the casino license to Penn National, which currently operates it.

Sen. Ron Collins, R-Wells, castigated Bridge Capital and its intent to sell its rights to the casino if the question passes, a plan that Riley confirmed Wednesday. Collins said many who signed the ballot petitions were likely unaware of the questionable history of Bridge Capital and that it is the only company that could be licensed to operate the casino.

"They got the signatures to put it on the ballot and they are going to be spending millions of dollars on advertising, probably six weeks prior to this Election Day in November, to convince people to vote for it. It will be slick advertising just like their whole approach to this was slick," Collins said before walking out of the committee room.

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“Clearly the legislation is drafted in a significantly limited scope of who might qualify should the initiative be passed by the voters. There is no question about that,” Riley said.

The initiative was advanced by Horseracing Jobs Fairness, a political group, and qualified [for the ballot in January on its second try](#)

. Secretary of State Matt Dunlap invalidated tens of thousands of signatures during the group’s first attempt last year.

Despite the implied promise of boosting the horseracing industry in Maine, lawmakers pointed out that the proposal would exempt the company from having to build or operate a horse track.

Riley said his client had been negotiating with the owners of Scarborough Downs, which is in Cumberland County, about purchasing that racetrack but those negotiations failed. The track is instead [being sold to a developer](#) not affiliated with Bridge Capital.

The ballot question will be the sixth concerning a casino to go to voters in the past decade. Voters have previously approved only two casinos, one in Oxford and the other in Bangor.

Horseracing Jobs Fairness has spent roughly \$4 million so far to support the initiative, with most of the money coming from Lisa Scott, a Miami resident involved in real estate development and Shawn Scott’s sister.

The initiative does not specify a location for the facility except that it will be in York County.

Lisa Scott, who was not at the hearing Wednesday, said in a statement in January that the proposed casino would create 800 construction jobs and more than 1,000 permanent jobs and keep millions of dollars in gaming revenue from leaving Maine and going to other New England casinos. Opponents argue that a southern Maine casino would cut into business at Maine’s two other casinos and cost jobs in those regions.

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It's not clear how much Bridge Capital could generate by selling the casino license.

Shawn Scott paid an estimated \$1.1 million to purchase a majority share in the Bangor harness racing track and then financed much of the \$1.5 million campaign behind the 2003 ballot question that led to the Hollywood casino in Bangor. Two months later, Scott sold the harness track and racino rights to Penn National for an estimated \$51 million.

The committee's Senate chairman, Garrett Mason, R-Lisbon, said he had strong reservations about the ballot question and the company behind it, citing reports that another of the company's casinos in Laos had been seized by the government amid a corruption investigation.

"The governments in Laos and Malaysia have shut down properties that are linked to this capital company," Mason said. "I have serious concerns about letting a company like this operate a casino in our state."

A press release on Bridge Capital's website issued last April says the company was cleared of wrongdoing by a federal court in the Northern Mariana Islands, suggesting the allegations against Bridge Capital were trumped up because the company did not pay bribes to foreign governments. According to its website, Bridge Capital is based on the island of Saipan, south of Japan.

House Chairman Louis Luchini, D-Ellsworth, also voiced strong reservations and said the committee had important questions that deserved answers, especially who would ultimately own the casino if it is approved.

Riley asked the committee to give him "a week or so" to get answers before voting to send the matter to the full Legislature.

Carroll Conley, executive director of the Christian Civic League of Maine, testified against the casino plan, saying he has worked against other casino questions in Maine over the past seven years but had seen nothing like the current proposal.

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“As I was putting this testimony together last night, one word came to mind and that was ‘bizarre,’ ” Conley said. “And that was before this which we just saw.”

Scott Thistle can be contacted at 791-6330 or at:

[\[email protected\]](#)

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