

By CLARKE CANFIELD

PORTLAND, Maine

Voters are being asked for the third time in four years if they want to allow a full-blown casino with slot machines and table games in Maine.

Black Bear Entertainment LLC wants to build a \$165 million, four-season casino and resort in the

western Maine town of Oxford. Backers say a casino would support thousands of jobs, pump tens of millions of dollars into the economy and generate more than \$60 million in tax revenue.

Opponents say a casino would suck money and jobs out of the local economy, while creating new problems such as increased crime and gambling addiction.

Mainers rejected a 2007 referendum calling for a casino with slots and table games in eastern Maine. A year later, by a 55-45 margin, they turned down another ballot measure for a casino in Oxford.

Maine's only casino, Hollywood Slots in Bangor, has 1,000 slot machines but no table games.

Supporters of this year's referendum are betting the bleak economy and high unemployment rate will sway more people to vote for Maine's first casino with blackjack, craps and other table games, in addition to slot machines. Black Bear Entertainment, which is comprised of a group of Maine business owners, said it has identified several potential sites on or near Route 26, but it won't divulge the exact locations.

Opponents say a casino doesn't constitute real economic development and would take more

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jobs out of the economy than it would add while fueling crime and gambling addiction. Critics further say the referendum would give the Oxford casino an unfair tax break that would allow it to pay lower taxes than Hollywood Slots pays on its operations.

If it passes, the proposal would prohibit any other casino or slot machine facility within 100 miles of the Oxford casino. Tax revenue would go to Maine public schools, universities and community colleges, agricultural fairs, harness racing purses, the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot Indian tribes, a dairy farm stabilization fund, the town of Oxford and the county.

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