

Network of companies with ties to York County casino bid stretches far and wide

Written by Administrator

Saturday, 09 September 2017 04:03 -

A campaign to win voter approval for a casino in York County is producing more questions than answers about the people and businesses behind the effort even as a new political action committee rolls out what is expected to be a multimillion dollar advertising and public relations blitz .

The global web of companies connected to the effort is vast and complicated and includes a California firm that works with large-scale foreign investors under a special visa program, as well as corporate connections to companies offshore and as far away as Japan.

Also on Friday, one businessman who was listed on the pro-casino Progress for Maine's new website as a backer of the project said he never authorized the use of his name or the name of his business, a franchise with Edward Jones Financial.

"I, in no way, shape or form ever gave permission to use my name or to use Edward Jones' name, nor did I give any money or any other support to this campaign," Sean Dumont, a financial adviser with the company in Sanford, said Friday. "This is totally fraudulent."

Dumont said he signed what he thought was a petition to allow a vote on the casino, but he is not a supporter of the casino or the campaign.

Michael Sherry, a representative with a Boston-based public relations firm hired by Progress for Maine, provided the Press Herald with a disclosure form that appears to have been signed by Dumont and gives permission to use his name and business in its campaign materials. "But we can certainly understand that people change their mind, so we are removing his name from the site to respect his wishes," Sherry wrote in an email Friday.

Meanwhile, many questions remain unanswered about the project's financial backers, the focus of investigations by two different government ethics panels in Augusta.

COMPANY'S ROLE UNCLEAR

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Among those questions is the role of California-based American General Corp. The company spent more than \$11,000 on in-kind contributions on the PAC's behalf in July, including paying its formation fee to the Maine Secretary of State. The company also sent one of its executives, Michelle Wilson, and another employee to Maine – paying for airfare, lodging, car rentals and salaries – as they worked to set up the pro-casino PAC, including paying for a website domain registration and temporary office space.

Wilson, American General's director of operations, and her associate, Rumiko Yoneyama, appear in Progress for Maine's initial campaign finance report that is on file with the Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices.

Wilson did not respond to a message seeking comment that was left at her office in California Friday. American General's website says it conducts business in five primary fields: real estate development, land development programming, overseas investment management, EB-5 visa-funded project management, and EB-5 investment and immigration.

The EB-5 visa program allows foreign investors, their spouses and families a path to permanent United States residency in exchange for investing a certain amount of money, usually between \$500,000 and \$1 million, in a U.S. business venture that preserves or creates at least 10 local jobs. The program is targeted for rural and economically distressed parts of the U.S.

In recent years, there have been numerous scandals involving the EB-5 program, including in Vermont where an investor in the Jay Peak resort was charged by state and federal authorities with using a complex web of accounts to intermingle funds, funneling some of the money into his own pocket and away from the intended purpose of the investments. The case remains under appeal in the courts, but also resulted in a \$150 million settlement fee being paid to the state by investment giant Raymond James, which was embroiled in the scandal.

CONNECTIONS TO SHAWN SCOTT

Based on online research, it appears that American General originally formed as an insurance company, but was reformed in 2003 by David Wilson and was incorporated in California, based on articles of incorporation on file with that state.

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David Wilson is also a partner in a different business with Shawn Scott, an international gambling entrepreneur who won voter approval to add slot machines to Bangor's struggling horse track in 2003, bringing Maine its first casino. Scott then sold those rights to Penn National – which still operates what is now Bangor's successful Hollywood Casino – for \$51 million as regulators scrutinized his businesses and associates.

This upcoming casino referendum, which will appear as Question 1, is intended to give exclusive rights to develop a casino to Shawn Scott or a company owned by him. The casino would have to be built in York County, and only in a community that votes to accept it in future municipal election.

The value of a license to build a casino in York County is estimated to be worth as much as \$200 million, officials say.

Shawn Scott's sister, Lisa Scott, also has been involved in the casino push, financing a two-year voter signature-gathering campaign that cost about \$4.3 million, according to filings with the Maine Ethics Commission. That effort and several of the subsequent ballot question committees formed by Lisa Scott remain the subject of ongoing investigations by the Ethics Commission and the Legislature's Government Oversight Committee.

A number of other companies connected to the Scotts and David Wilson, including the Mariana Islands-based Capital Seven and the Nevada-based Bridge Capital, also were involved in loaning or donating funds for the casino effort.

JAPAN-BASED COMPANY INVOLVED

The Ethics Commission also is working to determine the role of another company, Regent Able Associates, Co., which appears to be based in Japan and has loaned at least \$1.2 million to Miami Development Concepts, LLC, one of four ballot question committees formed by Lisa Scott.

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It remains unclear whether the ballot question committees set up by Lisa Scott or the original committee set up to gather voter signatures, Horseracing Jobs Fairness, will filter money to Progress for Maine or if some other entity will provide the PAC with funding. But, based on its initial campaign finance report filed in July, Progress for Maine had amassed more than \$330,000 in debts, including for services being provided by the public relations firm O'Neill and Associates and Goddard Gunster, a high-profile Washington, D.C.-based political consulting firm that specializes in referendums and initiatives.

Goddard Gunster was widely credited with helping Brexit campaigners win their ballot measure in 2016 to pull the United Kingdom out of the European Union. According to initial filings with the ethics commission, Progress for Maine has agreed to pay Goddard Gunster \$95,000 for its work on the campaign. That initial PAC report also shows that beyond the in-kind donations by American General, the PAC received only one \$200 donation, from Michelle Wilson.

Almost all the same entities involved in the current casino push in Maine, including Regent Able Associates, Co., also appear to have been involved in a failed ballot question for a slot-machines-only casino in Massachusetts in 2016. That effort failed when 60 percent of voters rejected the measure.

The PAC behind that campaign, dubbed the Horse Racing Jobs and Education Committee, was ultimately fined \$125,000 for violating campaign finance reporting laws in Massachusetts.

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