

Written by Administrator
Sunday, 24 December 2017 18:05 -

David Hurst, The Tribune-Democrat, Johnstown, Pa. (TNS)

Wagers will hit the table early next month for the first of 10 satellite casino licenses.

With a window closing Dec. 31 for communities statewide to consider prohibiting the move within their borders, the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board has unveiled a plan to aggressively find bidders for each one over the next six months.

Procedures set

Pennsylvania's 10 category 1 and 2 casino operators – license holders behind Rivers Casino in Pittsburgh, The Meadows and others – will have the opportunity to submit a sealed bid, which must be a minimum of \$7.5 million, for the first license, which will be awarded Jan. 10, gaming board officials indicated in a list of guidelines posted last week.

Bidders must also submit a second sealed envelope that would indicate the municipality where their casino would be situated. The winning applicant would then have to find a location within 15 miles of that spot, Gaming Control Board officials said.

The state law establishing “category 4” mini-casinos also has a list of regulations that would prohibit the casinos from being established near resort casinos, such as Lady Luck in Fayette County, or anywhere within 25 miles of an existing competitor.

In a move aimed at expanding gaming parlors to a swath of Pennsylvania currently void of gambling hubs, the restrictions virtually eliminate the Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Scranton areas, although an existing casino could opt to build its own, complimentary location nearby.

State leaders have speculated a stretch of central Pennsylvania — Johnstown, Altoona, State College and Williamsport — could be a potential target for one or more casinos. The corridor doesn't have a Pennsylvania gambling site within a 50 mile radius.

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Leaders in Johnstown — like many other small-to-mid-sized cities across Pennsylvania — have thrown support behind the idea of luring a mini-casino.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” Councilwoman Marie Mock said earlier this month, “I think Johnstown should do whatever it can to generate revenue.”

City officials voted Dec. 13 on a resolution to support a casino’s development in town — a move that is not required by the state.

Communities opt-out

But through an opt-out provision, hundreds of communities statewide — including State College — have decided they aren’t interested in the idea.

And that’s true for communities in Cambria and Somerset counties, too.

As of this week, seven Cambria County communities, including Westmont, Upper Yoder and Portage Township, have all drafted resolutions to prohibit casinos.

“To us, honestly, it was a nonissue. That’s not a practical thing for our community in any way,” Westmont Mayor Robert Callahan said, “we’re all long shots for a casino anyway,” Callahan said.

Next steps

The state Gaming Board has a set schedule that fast-tracks all 10 initial auctions through the first half of 2018.

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Following the first license's auction, three more will be held over the following six weeks — Jan. 24, Feb. 7 and Feb. 21 — on the second floor of Strawberry Square in Harrisburg.

The remaining auctions, each offering one license at a time, will occur March 7, March 21, April 4, April 18, May 2 and May 16, officials said in a news release Dec. 13.

If one or more licenses aren't awarded, another wave of auctions would be held. That would allow operators of Pennsylvania's small resort casinos to also make offers, as well as operators who might have already won the right to open mini-casinos in earlier rounds, gaming officials said.

Pennsylvania residents won't have to make the trip to Pennsylvania's capital to catch the auctions.

Gaming officials say they'll be streamed live through www.gamingcontrolboard.pa.gov.

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