

By CLARKE CANFIELD

PORTLAND, Maine

Voters by a narrow margin have approved the first full-blown casino in Maine that would have table games and slot machines.

With 97 percent of precincts reporting, just over 50 percent of voters in Tuesday's election favored allowing a casino

in the western Maine town of Oxford.

Black Bear Entertainment LLC wants to build a \$165 million, four-season casino and resort that backers say will 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 will drain money and jobs out of the local economy, while creating new problems such as increased crime and gambling addiction.

MaryBeth Pierce, a stay-at-home mom in Portland, voted against the referendum. She said she likes the concept of keeping casinos at a safe distance, like in Connecticut, so it's not as easy for people to lose thousands of dollars in a spur-of-the-moment day trip.

"The thing about the casino is, I just think that there's got to be a better way to get jobs into the state," she said. "While it may be great for the families that take the jobs, but there also are families that will be hurt because ... others will decide to blow their money at the casino and not make responsible decisions."

Robert Pierce Sr., an Augusta senior, said the casino was one of the issues that drew him to the polls.

"I'm not a big gambler, but I think it's good for the state," he said. "It's good for the jobs."

Mainers rejected a 2007 referendum calling for a casino with slots and table games in eastern Maine. A year later 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 were betting the bleak economy and high unemployment rate would 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 will take more jobs out of the economy than it would add while fueling crime and gambling addiction. Critics further say the referendum will give the Oxford casino an unfair tax break that would allow it to pay lower taxes than Hollywood Slots pays on its operations.

The referendum wording prohibits any other casino or slot machine facility within 100 miles of the Oxford casino. Tax revenue will 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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