

\$250 million casino proposal for Pope County stirs controversy

Written by Administrator

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by Talk Business & Politics

Plans to build a \$250 million complex in Pope County were met with opposition from some local elected officials (Photo: MGN)

LITTLE ROCK (Talk Business & Politics) —

An announcement that a Mississippi-based casino plans to build a \$250 million complex in Pope County was met with opposition from local elected officials on Friday (Dec. 28).

Gulfside Casino Partnership submitted a letter to the Arkansas Racing Commission from outgoing Pope County Judge Jim Ed Gibson in support of its application for casino gaming. Gulfside said it planned to build a \$250 million resort casino in three phases, if approved by state regulators, by mid-2020. Russellville Mayor Randy Horton has also written a letter of support for Gulfside.

The announcement comes more than a month after Arkansas voters approved Issue 4, now Amendment 100, to allow for expanded casino operations at Oaklawn (Garland Co.), Southland (Crittenden Co.) and new casinos in Pope and Jefferson counties.

“We are excited to make a significant economic investment in the Arkansas River Valley with this first-class resort,” said Terry Green, co-owner of Gulfside. “This project will create more than 1,500 new jobs and generate millions of dollars in taxes—improving the county’s infrastructure and its overall quality of life.”

The recently-passed amendment to the Arkansas Constitution requires that only one casino license can qualify in each of the two new counties. Applicants must “submit either a letter of support from the county judge or a resolution from the county quorum court in the county where the casino would be located and, if the proposed casino is to be located within a city, a letter of support from the mayor of that city,” the amendment states. It also says that a casino to be built in Pope County must be “within two miles of the city limits of the county seat,” which would be Russellville.

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Judge Gibson, who leaves office at the end of December, provided a letter of support for Gulfside's request, but plans for a location within any specific city limits have not been announced.

While state voters passed the amendment by a 54-46% margin, it failed in Pope County by a 60-40% margin. Pope County voters also passed a local ordinance by a nearly 70% margin that requires an election to allow a casino to be built in the area. The casino amendment passed in the surrounding counties around Pope County ranging from 51% approval to 56% approval.

On Friday, Pope County Judge-elect Ben Cross, who will take office on Jan. 1, 2019, said he was opposed to any casino being built in the county.

"It is with great discouragement and dismay to have learned of the actions of the current county judge in regards to the casino issue. To have a lame duck official act in total disregard to the express wishes of the residents of Pope County is appalling and a complete affront to our representative democracy," Cross said in a statement to content partner KATV. "Legal challenges aside, it is my responsibility to represent and respect the voters' decision of those who elected me to lead our county."

Read more at [Talk Business & Politics](#).

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