

Arkansas mayor backs casino plan on last day

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 01 January 2019 05:06 -

On his last day in office Monday, Russellville Mayor Randy Horton threw his support behind a Mississippi company's proposal to build a 600-room, \$254 million hotel and casino in Pope County -- despite opposition from some local residents and an ongoing lawsuit over another official's similar support.

Horton -- who lost his re-election bid to newcomer Richard Harris in a December runoff -- submitted the letter to the Arkansas Racing Commission on Monday, just days after Jim Ed Gibson, the county judge for Pope County, expressed support for the Gulfside Casino Partnership to obtain one of the state's first licenses for a full-fledged casino.

Monday also was Gibson's last day in office after serving nearly 20 years in the seat.

Horton said in the letter that Gulfside "best exemplifies the ideal for an operator for Pope County."

"The community support, reputation, employee satisfaction, commitment to security, quality of properties and history of supporting and giving back to the surrounding community combined with verifiable financial stability and legal gaming operations are all factors in this evaluation," Horton wrote. "Their proposal of a resort style, family friendly development that is aesthetically compatible with the surrounding area also represent the goals that I would have applied had the development been located within the City."

Harris, who is being sworn in today as Russellville's new mayor, ran his campaign on the anti-casino platform. He said Monday that he was "very discouraged" by Horton's actions because it goes against the will of the people he represents.

"I do not believe a casino is good for our community," Harris said. "Based on the information I've received and looking at surrounding states, I'm convinced it would do more detriment to our community than benefit."

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In November, state voters approved Amendment 100 to the state constitution authorizing casino gambling in Jefferson and Pope counties as well as alongside existing gambling facilities at the racetracks in Hot Springs and West Memphis.

The amendment requires that any casino license proposals for Pope and Jefferson counties have the support of either the county judge or the quorum court. The mayor's support must be obtained if the casino is to be built within city limits.

In the same election, Pope County voters also approved a countywide ordinance prohibiting either the county judge or the Quorum Court from drafting a letter in support of a proposed casino without first getting approval from voters in a countywide election. No such countywide election has taken place.

James Price Knight of Russellville, who campaigned against casinos during the election, filed suit Thursday against Gibson. An amended complaint was filed Friday, after the release of the letter, seeking to have the letter declared invalid.

Harris said he is not sure what course of counteraction he will take once he's sworn into office today.

"The letter of support really doesn't mean a lot because Gulfside is looking at property outside the city limits. I'm not sure if it carries any weight," Harris said. "The only thing I'm worried about is that the Racing Commission might take his letter as an indication that the citizens are in favor of the casino. If I do anything, it may only be to write a letter to the commission as an incoming mayor."

State Sen. Breanne Davis, R-Russellville, requested an opinion from Attorney General Leslie Rutledge on Thursday night, regarding the legality of the county judge's letter. Harris said Davis is planning to file proposed legislation concerning the last-minute support from outgoing officials.

Messages left for Davis were not returned as of late Monday.

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Incoming County Judge Ben Cross, who was a member of the Pope County Quorum Court, said Friday that he was surprised by Gibson's letter and said in a statement that 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."

Gulfside, which operates the Island View Casino Resort in Gulfport, Miss., announced Friday that it plans to open the casino by mid-2020, if granted the license. The company will move forward with its plans despite the controversy, said Casey Castleberry, Gulfside's attorney.

"For months now, Gulfside has presented its case for how it will help boost the local economy, create good-paying jobs and keep tax dollars here in Arkansas," Castleberry said Monday in a prepared statement. "This letter reiterates the strong support it has received from local community and business leaders in Pope County."

The 340-page draft rules for operating a casino in Arkansas were released on Friday, and Byron Freeland, an attorney for the Racing Commission, said that the "nuts and bolts" of the proposed rules were taken from Nevada's casino regulations.

The draft includes regulatory requirements for offering card games, sports betting and other forms of gambling.

Freeland said he doesn't expect much opposition to the rules from prospective casino operators because he sought their input and Nevada's rules are widely respected.

Freeland added that the rules will go before the commission on Jan. 10, and if approved, they'll be published for a 30-day public comment period before receiving final approval from the commission and lawmakers.

All except one of the prospective casino operators declined to comment on the draft rules.

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"If given a license in Pope County, Gulfside will operate under gaming rules promulgated by the commission," said Castleberry, the attorney for Gulfside. "Since the inception of gaming in Mississippi more than three decades ago, Gulfside has incurred no infractions. Arkansans can expect the same."

A Section on 01/01/2019

CORRECTION: The office held by Sen. Breanne Davis, R-Russellville, was incorrectly named in an earlier version of this article.

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