

Waukegan finally gets its seat at casino table

Written by Administrator
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After waiting for decades, Waukegan finally has a seat at the Illinois gambling table, with a casino approved as part of a sweeping gambling expansion bill.

Legislators approved the measures this weekend and Gov. J.B. Pritzker says he will sign the legislation into law. That will get the ball rolling to provide what Waukegan regards as a long-sought and well-deserved economic boost.

"I want to be right there with (Pritzker)," Mayor Sam Cunningham said.

Cunningham doesn't yet have many specifics, such as the size of the casino or how much new revenue the city can expect from it, but he knows it will make a difference.

"Once we get the final bill, we can give you a better answer," he said Monday afternoon. "This is an exciting time."

Cunningham believes the gambling bill, which calls for six new casinos, will benefit the entire state by bringing new revenue. The others are authorized for Rockford, Danville, the South suburbs, Williamson County and downtown Chicago.

The next steps for Waukegan will be for city aldermen to formulate local policies, then seek proposals from casino operators, according to Cunningham.

Officials would then draft a redevelopment agreement for a vacant, city-owned 32-acre site at the southwest corner of Route 120 and Waukegan Road (Route 43), which purposefully has been kept available for this possibility.

Revenue from the casino is expected to accelerate some city initiatives, such as redevelopment of the Lake Michigan lakefront.

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"Now, we have defined means. Our goal is to become the premier destination on the North Shore," Cunningham said.

"We have met the original criteria of gambling -- disadvantaged communities that could use an economic boost. We meet that three times over," he said.

Waukegan has been in the hunt for a casino since the 1990s, when lawmakers first allowed riverboat gambling in Illinois.

In 1999, the law was changed to allow gambling boats to be permanently docked, and there have been periodic proposals since to expand the number of land-based casinos.

Waukegan was among several communities competing for a single license in 2008, but state authorities ultimately granted it to Des Plaines.

"We've worked hard at it. Now, we've got to capitalize on that," Cunningham said.

Longtime state Sen. Terry Link, a former Waukegan resident who now lives in Indian Creek, has been steadfast in his support of a casino for that part of Lake County and was the sponsor of Senate Bill 690, awaiting Pritzker's signature. He was not immediately available for comment Monday.

The impact of a Waukegan casino is expected to reach beyond the city limits into other parts of Lake County.

"The hundreds of jobs and millions of dollars in tax revenue will certainly benefit those nearby communities," said Kevin Considine, president & CEO of Lake County Partners, the county's development arm.

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