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Developers choose site for new

casino Residents, business owners welcome project proposed for 100-acre lot in Oxford

BY J. HEMMERDINGER

OXFORD -- Residents and business owners near Pigeon Hill, the chosen location for a \$165 million casino resort, said Friday that they are looking forward to the arrival of their new neighbor.

"I have no reservations at all. I have seen the downturn in the economy since 2004, and I think this will highlight the area and how great western Maine is," said Cyndi Robbins, owner of the nearby Poland Spring Resort.

On Friday, Black Bear Entertainment presented its first detailed plan for the project, which it hopes to build on a 100-acre lot on Route 26 near Rabbit Valley Road, about 45 miles northwest of Portland.

Blueprints show plans for an ice rink, ATV and cross-county ski trails, and an RV park.

Most of the land, fallow farmland and forest, is owned by former Oxford selectman Evan Thurlow, who lives nearby. Thurlow, reached by telephone, declined to comment.

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Developers would not disclose the purchase price for the land, but one investor, Bob Bahre, said Black Bear Entertainment signed the purchase agreement and paid a deposit two months ago, contingent on the casino's approval by Maine voters.

That approval came Nov. 2, in a vote so close that opponents of the casino have requested a recount. Meanwhile, plans for Maine's only casino with table games are taking shape.

At a press conference Friday at Oxford Town Hall, Robert Lally of Black Bear Entertainment said the company is still seeking state permits, but hopes to break ground next spring.

The project is to be completed over five years in three phases, the first of which calls for a 65,000-square-foot casino, restaurant and lounge. Next would come a 200-room hotel, followed by meeting space for conventions in the final stage.

The entire project would be complete within five years.

Black Bear expects the first phase to be complete by next year, with a grand opening planned for December 2011.

Business owners, reporters and town officials visited the site for the casino after Friday's press conference.

Bill Penfold, owner of Oxford Auto Salvage, said the best thing about the project is the jobs it would bring to the area, which has lost hundreds of manufacturing jobs in recent years.

"There is no work. I hope they hire the people that are here and who supported the project. We need it here," said Penfold, walking along the dirt road that leads to the property.

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Denise Pressey, 56, said she voted for the casino -- even before she knew it would be across the street from her home. Standing on her front porch, she said she's still for it, but she hopes the developer gets past the initial phase. The first phase wouldn't create enough jobs, she said.

Black Bear spokesman Mark Robinson said the developer's plans are not "set in stone."

"The philosophy is to approach it from a financially prudent standpoint," Robinson said. "We are in a terrible economy. If things turn around and the project moves well, it may move faster."

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