

Despite passage, Mainers divided on casino - The Maine Campus

Written by Administrator
Sunday, 14 November 2010 23:05 -

Maine voters narrowly passed a citizen's initiative to bring a resort gambling facility to Oxford County on Nov. 2.

Despite resident's approval of [Question 1](#) , the measure is still proving to be divisive.

After a campaign that spent millions to bring the resort to western Maine and another that spent hundreds of thousands to

block it, both sides are still weighing in on the consequences the facility will have for the state, with proponents plugging its ability to create jobs and opponents skeptical of nearly everything related to the cause.

Black Bear Entertainment, a group of Maine investors behind the Oxford County project with no affiliation to [UMaine](#) , has proposed a \$165 million resort that will be built in three phases. According to proposals, the facility will include a casino, a 200-room hotel, restaurants, a convention space and a spa. Investors say the project will generate 1,700 jobs and construction could begin as early as spring 2011.

Last week the divide separating the two parties was evident. On Nov. 9, members of No on One, CasinosNo! and OHNo1, organizations leading the charge against the measure, delivered a petition with 150 signatures to the Maine Secretary of State's office in Augusta, barely making the deadline for a recount. The reason for a recount, opponents say, is the slim margin by which the measure passed. Voters approved the resort by 282,467 in favor, versus 276,845 against: 51 percent to 49 percent, according to unofficial results.

"Because of the closeness of the vote, we feel we owe it to those who have fought for more than 10 years against casinos in Maine, to ensure that the vote result is accurate," said Dennis Bailey, the executive director of CasinosNo!

Meanwhile, last Friday, Black Bear Entertainment presented its first detailed plans for the project by announcing a location for the complex on a 100-acre lot 45 miles northwest of Portland.

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“For months, opponents have tried to prevent a jobs-making project headed by Maine businesspeople — we want to begin creating those jobs now,” said Jim Boldebook, an investor with Black Bear Entertainment.

But the project’s opponents continue to question the job growth promised by investors. They say there is more involved than just jobs.

One stipulation included in the legislation behind the ballot proposal would prevent any other gaming facility from being built within a 100-mile radius of the Oxford County casino. The new resort would also be the only one of its kind in the state to offer table games, something those critical of the project say is unfair, as entities such as Hollywood Slots and Penobscot High Stakes Bingo have unsuccessfully pursued similar approval from voters and legislators.

“By not allowing any other establishment to be built within a 100-mile radius, that’s really putting teeth in the law and sending the wrong message to operations already in the state and out-of-state investors as well,” said Dan Cashman, spokesman for Citizens Against the Oxford County casino. “It’s really not fair to them or the entire area. The radius actually extends into Eastern, Northern and Western Maine.”

The recount is expected to take less than one month according to the Maine Secretary of State’s office. Officials there said the process usually involves checking for clerical errors, but opponents like Bailey say that provisions such as table games and a monopoly on a 100-mile radius could lead to other courses of action, such as lawsuits.

“I don’t think you can write a law for private gain,” he said.

Even so, investors are rapidly moving the process forward and continue to stand behind the positive effect it could have on the state’s economy. Investor Robert Lally Jr. said the project will annually generate more than \$60 million for the state. Those funds would be directed to specific state programs in education ranging from K-12 to higher education, according to the measure’s legislation.

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“At a time when revenues are decreasing and jobs are scarce, the voters approved a good deal for the state,” said Lally. “This doom and gloom message is completely unnecessary.”

Bailey responded to the jobs growth claim by questioning the project’s true economic impact.

“Despite what they are projecting in state revenues — they know they’ll make twice as much — it doesn’t matter either way to them, they still win,” he said. “The guarantee of positive impact is just too unclear.”

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