

## City council approves racetrack / casino 'racino'

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 18 August 2021 02:27 -

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Mayor Brandon Kelliher cast the deciding vote Tuesday to allow a casino and horse racetrack to develop in North Platte.

The council had a two-hour discussion before the vote, discussing the complexities of the project as well as moral and socio-economic aspects of gambling.

Attorney Brian Jorde, a member of the board of directors for the project, said he is excited about the prominent location alongside I-80 and the number of lodging and restaurants in the area.

Jorde said the company plans to be a partner with the community and bring 1.7 million people to North Platte per year, with 33% of them coming from out of state. He said the casino and track could employ 200-275 people, with an annual payroll in excess of \$5 million per year.

Jorde said it would take two years to build the track and hold the first race, and when that happens, the company will pursue the casino. When the casino is built, organizers plan to operate it 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Jorde predicted that the casino will generate new taxes in excess of \$1.4 million to the city, plus an equal amount to Lincoln county, as well as \$8 million annually to state's property tax relief fund.

The council split 4-4 on the decision, with Ed Rieker, Donna Tryon, Ed Woods and Jim Nisley voting no.

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Nisley, who said little during the debate, seemed to agonize when the time came and was the last to cast his vote. His no vote put the decision squarely in Kelliher's lap.

Kelliher first noted that if he didn't vote, the motion to approve the track would fail.

The 4-4 vote on the city council screen

Before he pushed the voting button, Kelliher said he was concerned about the morality of the community, but also proud of the council for making several decisions so far this year that will affect the future of the town.

"This is one of those decisions," he said.

After pausing to gather his thoughts and perhaps his resolve, Kelliher said, "I believe that we are all given freewill for a reason. We may not contemplate exactly what that reason is. We might not understand it completely. But we have free will for a reason. I'm also a big believer in personal responsibility. My vice is chocolate cake, not Little Debbie's, but if I eat chocolate cake and fried chicken and things that aren't necessarily healthy for me, then I pay the price for that. I don't gamble, other than I occasionally donate a little money to the people in Las Vegas when I go there, but it's a very small amount. But I do believe in freewill, so I'm going to vote in favor. This item passes."

The permit comes with two conditions. 1) The city and the developer must agree in writing how the infrastructure – streets, utility lines, parking lot and paving – will be improved, and who will pay the costs, before construction can begin. The developers have offered to pay all the infrastructure costs.

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Also, 2) construction must begin within two years or the permit is revoked.

Councilman Ty Lucas was a leading voice in favor of the track. He said voters clearly approved gambling in the last election, so that decision is already made. He said the council should honor the will of the voters.

Councilman Ed Rieker led the opposition. He has no problem with the horse racetrack but objects to gambling and the problems it would bring — an increase in addiction and consequential harm to families. He also said the casino might lead to an increase in prostitution and sex trafficking.

“I think we have sociological responsibility to that into consideration when we cast our vote,” Rieker said. “I’m not opposed to horse racing, but I am opposed to a casino. Those two are inextricably linked.”

“Dollars and cents are not everything, they really aren’t,” he said.

Councilwoman Donna Tryon said the city has four major developments in the works, none of which are complete, and recommended pausing to see better how things develop. She also said she has not heard from anyone who wants the project, and noted that North Platte has a relatively high number of families who qualify for free and reduced lunches because they are near the poverty line.

“I just don’t think we have the finances in town to support a casino,” she said.

Councilman Pete Volz, on the other hand, said all the development going on in North Platte is a good thing and added that it is “kind of important to make hay while the sun shines.”

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"I drive around town and watch our good fortune being produced in front of our eyes," Volz said.

During the public hearing and discussion, Shawn Boyd of Global Gaming Solutions said the racetrack would be built to the highest standards. He said North Platte is in the center of the central states with thousands of potential quarter horse racehorses. Nebraska has nearly 80,000 registered quarter horses, although only about a dozen are certified as racehorses. Surrounding states also have tens of thousands of quarter horses, and the number of certified race horses is sure to increase, proponents said.

The North Platte "racino" will make the city a hub of gambling. The track will be tied to tracks in Hastings and Gering, creating a circuit for quarter horse races. The majority of races will be held in North Platte. The track will also be the minimum length for thoroughbred racing.

North Platte will stand alone from competition in Grand Island, Omaha, Lincoln and Scottsbluff, Boyd said. "You'll have the competitive advantage."

Lucas said if North Platte does not embrace the opportunity, "we might stub our toe if Ogallala or Gothenburg does embrace it."

That would be foolish, he said, leaving North Platte with some of the detrimental affects of gambling without the financial benefits.

Councilman Brad Garrick voiced the concerns of a gambling counselor in town, Ron Felton, who said gambling addiction goes hand-in-hand with drug and alcohol addiction as well as bankruptcies. Felton, who couldn't attend the meeting, predicts that most of the money spent at the "racino" will come from people within a 75-mile radius, not a wider area. Felton also noted it would reduce the amount of Keno revenue for the city. Garrick said the city budget is counting on \$190,000 next year from Keno.

Garrick said he personally voted against legalizing casinos and was surprised when the voters approved it but nevertheless, he agreed with Lucas.

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"The voters have spoken. We need to honor that," he said.

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