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Metro

# East Boston voters decide fate of Suffolk Downs casino

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 05, 2013

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DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

**Longtime East Boston resident Tom Domenico, 72, made no mistake how he felt about a casino in East Boston.**

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With a referendum on the ballot that would allow a casino to be built in their section of the city, East Boston voters flocked to the polls today in higher numbers than they did in the September preliminary elections.

As of 6 p.m., 6,208 voters, or 37.2 percent, had cast ballots, according to city data. That was up sharply from the September preliminary election, when the casino proposal was not on the ballot. At the same point in that election, only 3,763, or 22.9 percent, had voted in East Boston.

The proposal, which calls for a \$1 billion casino at the site of the Suffolk Downs racetrack, has spurred a heated debate and it's unclear whether the pro- or anti-casino forces are leading.

At the East Boston High School polling location, nearly two dozen people stood outside making an array of last-minute pitches to voters.

As she made her way through the crowds in front of the school, Julie Lopilato, 40, said she planned to support the casino proposal. But it wasn't an easy decision, she said.

"You have influence from a lot of different people, but I've made this decision on my own," Lopilato said

She said many of her friends work at Suffolk Downs and she worries that without the casino the track could close and they would lose their jobs.

Anthony DiBenedetto, 62, said he too voted yes on the casino proposal, but "I was torn."

He cited his concern over traffic the casino could bring to the neighborhood.

"There's good arguments on both sides. But it came down to economic development and jobs," he said. "Let's face it, if there's no casino, it [Suffolk Downs] is closing."

Meanwhile, Krysten Hunt, 24, said she was going to vote against the casino proposal.

She cited concerns over traffic, pollution, crime and gambling addiction.

"All that stuff? No, thanks. It's fine the way it is," she said.

At the Orient Heights Housing Community Building, long-time East Boston resident Joe T., 82, said he supported the casino proposal.

"We'd be lucky to have a casino there," he said.

Just outside the polling location, he stood on a hill overlooking a large oil depot next door to Suffolk Downs.

"Look at these oil farms over here," he said. "What would you rather have, another oil farm or a casino?"

When the proposal was unveiled last year, it appeared to have strong support. But, leading up to Election Day, the neighborhood has become increasingly divided.

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As negotiations around the proposal dragged on, opponents have had more time to try to sway potential voters.

And, three weeks ago, Suffolk Downs abruptly dropped partner Caesars Entertainment from the proposal after state gambling commission investigators recommended the prominent casino corporation be disqualified from bidding in part because of its relationship with a New York hotel company that includes ownership with alleged ties to Russian gangsters.

The proposal remains without a casino operator. Revere is holding its own vote Tuesday over whether to support or reject the casino proposal, which would straddle the East Boston-Revere line.

If voters in either East Boston or Revere decide not to approve the proposal, it will die.

If voters in both communities approve the casino proposal, Suffolk Downs will continue to battle for the lone Greater Boston resort casino license against two others: a Wynn Resorts proposal in Everett and a Foxwoods proposal in Milford.

In June, Everett voted to back the casino proposal there; Milford residents are slated to vote Nov. 19.

One recent poll about the East Boston vote showed opposition for the casino at 46 percent and support at 42 percent, while another showed 47 percent of neighborhood voters supporting the track and 42 percent opposing.

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