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Metro

East Boston rejects casino at Suffolk Downs

Revere-only project considered

By **Mark Arsenault** | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 06, 2013

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In one swift blow, East Boston voters dashed casino dreams years in the making Tuesday, defeating a \$1 billion Suffolk Downs gambling resort proposal once widely considered a lock to win the state's most lucrative gambling license.

With the project winning a majority of support in Revere, however, Suffolk Downs will explore moving the entire development onto the Revere side of the city line, Chip Tuttle, the track's chief operating officer, told the Globe.

It was a difficult day across the state for supporters of Massachusetts' emerging casino industry, as another well-established casino proposal fell in Palmer, where voters rejected a nearly \$1 billion Mohegan Sun plan.

The twin defeats for the gambling industry come as casino executives and insiders have questioned the scrutiny Massachusetts regulators have put on the state's applicants, and after one of the industry's biggest companies dropped out of the Suffolk Downs project over questions about another business relationship.

In East Boston, voters proved to be unmoved by big promises, pro-casino endorsements from powerful politicians — including Mayor Thomas M. Menino — and nearly \$2 million in campaign spending by Suffolk Downs.

Krysten Hunt, 24, summed up the anti-casino position, saying she did not want more potential traffic, pollution, crime, or gambling addiction in her neighborhood. "All that stuff? No, thanks," she said. "It's fine the way it is."

The ballot box failure leaves the future of New England's last thoroughbred racetrack in grave doubt. The 78-year-old track has been losing money for years, as its owners

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have pumped in cash to keep Suffolk Downs afloat in anticipation of adding a profitable casino.

“Voters . . . struck a decisive blow to the casino culture, a clear signal that the Commonwealth believes there are better economic options than casinos and slot barns,” John Ribeiro, chairman of the Repeal the Casino Deal campaign, said in a statement Tuesday night.

The casino proposal fell in East Boston by a vote of 4,281 to 3,353. Neighborhood voter turnout was about 47 percent, according to unofficial results.

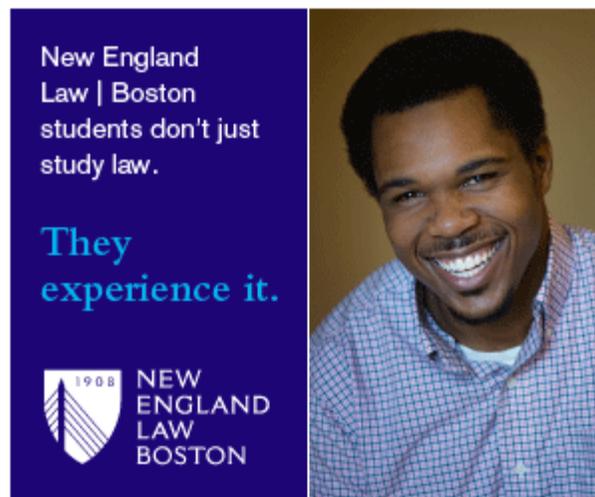
Menino, who supported the Suffolk Downs project and signed a deal with the developers that would have provided at least \$32 million annually to the city, believes the political system has worked.

“The mayor always said the people of East Boston should decide what happens in their neighborhood — and they did,” said Menino’s spokeswoman, Dot Joyce.

It is unclear whether Suffolk Downs can create a viable Revere-only plan before final proposals are due, on Dec. 31, but Revere’s mayor, Dan Rizzo, invited the track to try. “Fifty-three acres of the property are in Revere,” Rizzo told the Globe. “If there is a way to reshape the project so it fits entirely in Revere, we’re going to pursue it.”

Celeste Myers, a leader of the Suffolk Downs opposition group, No Eastie Casino, said she was not expecting such a resounding victory. “This is East Boston — folks are protecting their lives, livelihoods and homes,” she said in an interview. “These people can’t be bought.”

Myers said the group will oppose any 11th-hour effort to try to move the project. Public officials, she said, “need to take no for an answer.”



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

Louis Ciarlone, president and business manager of IBEW Local 123, embraced state Representative Kathi-Anne Reinstein of Revere after the casino vote was announced

The casino proposal was widely expected to pass in Revere. But public opinion across Boston has long been divided on permitting a Suffolk Downs casino, and recent polls of East Boston voters also reflected a deep split in the neighborhood.

Suffolk Downs was probably hurt by a public relations blow three weeks before the vote, when the track dropped its hand-picked casino operator, Caesars Entertainment, after state investigators recommended that the gambling giant be disqualified from bidding for a casino license. Investigators raised several concerns, such as the company's enormous debt and its licensing agreement with a New York boutique hotel company owned in part by a businessman allegedly linked to Russian mobsters.

If Suffolk Downs cannot go on, only two proposals will be left standing in the contest for the Greater Boston license: a Wynn Resorts plan for the Mystic River waterfront in Everett and a Foxwoods project in suburban Milford.

Wynn won a referendum in June; Milford votes Nov. 19.

In Western Massachusetts, just one project remains — an MGM proposal in downtown Springfield. MGM won a referendum in July; it has not yet passed its state background check.

Palmer defeated the Mohegan Sun proposal, despite the company's five years of ground work there, by a vote of 2,657 to 2,564 with a staggering 66 percent turnout.

Mohegan Sun chief executive Mitchell Etess noted in a statement that “the results . . . are extremely close — less than 100 votes. And the incredibly strong turnout is indicative of how engaged people on both sides of the issue have become.”

Etess said the company will ask for a recount.

Springfield political strategist Anthony Cignoli said Palmer has seen an influx of residents in the past seven years or so. They moved there for a rural lifestyle, he said, and apparently voted to keep it that way.

Globe correspondents Jarret Bencks and Matt Rocheleau contributed to this report. Mark Arsenault can be reached at mark.arsenault@globe.com.

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