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Casino in Flint suffers setback

OK vote in Romulus doesn't end hopes

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Wednesday, December 03, 2003

By Shena Abercrombie
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Flint - While the hopes of backers of a Flint casino may have suffered a setback, they're not ready to bet against such a development here.

Romulus residents voted Tuesday to allow a \$350 million casino and a separate horse track in their community, which may derail plans to bring gambling to the Flint area.

If voters in the Detroit suburb that is home to the Detroit Metropolitan

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Airport had turned down the casino, Flint was one of only two other communities on a list that the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians had state approval to consider for a casino. Monroe is the other.

Flint Councilman Ed Taylor said city residents will soon see a proposal coming out of City Council that would take the gambling question back to voters.



"The vote (in Romulus) is not going to hurt our plan; everybody knew it was going to happen," said Ed Taylor. "We're going to have a vote as well."

Residents here rejected two gambling proposals in 1994 by a slim margin.

A spokesman for the tribe, Steve Mitchell, said in the Detroit Free Press today: "The tribe has made a commitment to Romulus to locate here if the referendum passed. They will honor it."

The proposed casino facility would have a conference center and resort with 2,500 slot machines and more than 90 table games.

With all 18 Romulus precincts reporting, 2,879 voters or 56.6 percent cast ballots in favor of the casino proposal and 2,211 or 43.4 percent of voters cast ballots against it.

On a separate vote about the track, a total of 2,664 ballots or 53.2 percent were cast in support of that proposal, while 2,343 or 46.8 percent were against it.

"That (proposed Flint casino) vote will pass hopefully and then we'll be even (with Romulus)," added Eric Mays, who is working with Taylor to bring the gaming industry to Flint.

Mays said the city's economic climate will sway voters this time around.

"Timing is everything as it relates to this," Mays said. "We

still have a lot of time left. I think we have more going for us than Romulus."

"We're not talking strictly gambling and casinos. What we're talking about is jobs that range in pay up to \$40,000 a year with benefits. We're talking good-paying UAW jobs. I think just like in Romulus, people will vote for jobs."

A vote to approve the casino does not guarantee that one will open in Romulus or Flint.

There is opposition to allowing off-reservation casinos among House Republican leaders, including Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., and Tom DeLay, R-Texas.

Only three off-reservation casinos currently exist nationwide.

The gaming issue resurfaced for areas such as Flint, Romulus and Monroe County when Gov. John Engler left office and signed off on a last-minute agreement that would permit the Upper Peninsula tribe to open another casino in the state.

The tribe owns Detroit's Greektown Casino.

In Romulus, the thoroughbred racetrack is being proposed by Aurora, Ontario-based Magna Entertainment.

The initial plan calls for the \$100-million track first. If demand warrants, a 675,000-square-foot retail and entertainment complex would be built later.

Romulus officials say the two ventures could mean combined annual tax revenues of between \$7 million and \$13 million.

Taylor said Flint could edge out Romulus on a technicality - a 150-mile clause Detroit leaders put in place to keep competing casinos at bay.

"Detroit City Council would have to waive that," Taylor said. "They don't want Romulus to have it. It's too close. Downtown Detroit casinos would end up losing and that's not going to happen. Flint is the ideal location. It's a totally different market."

Taylor said his group has already shopped the idea of the old Buick City site as a location for an entertainment complex with a casino to Chicago-based Jones Lange LaSalle, which is spearheading the Buick City

redevelopment.

"That is the ideal site for it," he said. "The casino is just one component of the entire development. We're moving forward with a plan for a hotel, convention center, golf course and casino."

Shena Abercrombie covers colleges and universities. She can be reached at (810) 766-6307 or sabercrombie@flintjournal.com. Information from The Associated Press is included in this report.

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