

Blackpool defiant despite damning casino report

Supporters of Blackpool's bid to host the UK's only permitted regional super-casino have rubbished comments in a government-commissioned report that stated that the town had „no space“ for a site on such a scale, insisting its chances have not been affected.

Together with Manchester, Glasgow and Coventry, the town is among the front-running locations battling to win the bid, which it is claimed could bring in as much as £500 million and thousands of jobs to the local economy and boost the area's entertainment industry.

A string of reports have been commissioned ahead of The Casino Advisory Panel's impending decision into the most suitable location for the super-casino and 16 other smaller ones. However the most recent report, compiled by planning and development economist Roger Tym and Partners for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, has provoked anger in the country's light entertainment capital.

Former managing director of Leisure Parks and gaming consultant Mark Etches branded the report a „load of rubbish“, and said its conclusion about the resort was contradicted by the evidence.

He added: „It's nonsense. Of course it has space. Blackpool was identified eight years ago as an ideal area for casinos and has been at the forefront as things have progressed. Does anyone really think that Blackpool could have sustained the level of support it has from the variety of parties that it has and for that length of time if there wasn't sufficient space? The casino is at the heart of Blackpool's urban regeneration plans and there are a number of potential sites,

so to say that there is not room for even one is quite ridiculous.“

Under the Gambling Act 2005, passed in April, licences will be granted for one regional, eight large casinos and eight small casinos. The law has also introduced the requirement of an area devoted to non-gambling activities, including entertainment – an entirely new statutory concept.

While all the proposed sites would potentially be able to host entertainment, only the regional casino project will automatically attract millions of pounds worth of urban regeneration money. As the smallest of the leading contenders, with a local economy disproportionately dependent on the entertainment and leisure sector, Blackpool has most to lose from a failed bid.

A spokesperson for Blackpool Council said the authority was not taking seriously the conclusions from the latest report. Its authors Roger Tym and Partners declined to comment on how those conclusions were reached.

However Etches agreed with the report's claim that there could be an increase in the number of sites. Pre-election political wrangling over the Gaming Act meant that there will only be one super-casino for the initial three year period rather than the originally proposed eight, plus eight „large“ and eight „small“ venues.

He said: „There are serious advantages for local economies in terms of urban regeneration and jobs in an array of sectors but obviously including entertainment. More than 50 local authorities have expressed an interest in bidding for a regional casino so it seems patently obvious that the demand is there.“

It is estimated that regional casinos could attract between 4,000 and 5,000 visitors a day with figures peaking at the weekend. Proposals for developments in Blackpool, Manchester

and Coventry indicate that the gambling would amount to 8% of the total proposed floor area, with the rest used for other leisure activities such as entertainment. Without the casino these extra services would not be viable.

Etches warned super-casino were essential to attract overseas investors. He added that Harrah's Entertainment, owner of Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas, was now developing the first resort-casino in Spain. The company, which regularly uses entertainment and has links with leading performers such as Elton John and Celine Dion, is known to be interested in the UK market.