

New casino boat in town

A new gambling boat could begin sailing from the Little River docks today, just weeks after Horry County Council decided not to ban such operations.

The Diamond Girl II will replace the Southern Elegance after a buyout by Myrtle Beach businessman Al Shuman and his Diamond Management company.

Shuman said his plans to invest in gambling out of the Little River waterfront weren't influenced by County Council's decision to tax instead of ban the floating casinos.

Horry County decided in March that it will create new taxes on the boats instead of banning them, but the councilman who represents Little River said he will push for the ban if the gambling operations attempt to expand.

Councilman Harold Worley, who represents Little River, said the county is working on a plan to tax the boats and will likely go for the maximum amount allowed under law.

„We are not going to leave a nickel on the table,“ Worley said.

The latest boat, loaded with hundreds of slot machines and 24 gaming tables, pulled into the docks last week and crews were working feverishly Monday to pass U.S. Coast Guard inspections.

The state's only other gambling ship, SunCruz, also operates from the Little River waterfront.

Georgetown County had the first casino boat in the state but currently has none and passed a county law to keep them out. An operator is challenging that in court.

SunCruz has challenged a state law that allows counties to

decide if gambling boats are allowed as well as challenging the method of taxation. State law passed in June allows the county to charge up to 10 percent of boarding fees and 5 percent of gross proceeds, or ban them after a five-year grace period.

The boats must take passengers outside state waters where gambling is legal.

„We plan to sail, with everything going all right, by Wednesday morning,“ said Shuman, who is chief executive officer for Diamond Management, which also owns car dealerships and real estate.

□lw-3Diamond Management has plans for expansion but not necessarily in Little River. It operates another gambling boat in Savannah, Ga., and is now scouting areas in Florida for a third operation, Shuman said.

Diamond also plans to expand to another port in South Carolina _ Shuman wouldn't say where _ and to a total of five casino boats by 2008, he said.

Little River is not the place to expand because the town doesn't have the roads or parking space to accommodate more gambling cruise passengers, Worley said.

„If they try to expand, I will vote to ban the boats,“ he said. „I am not interested in allowing them to expand. They can continue to operate just how they are.“

SunCruz, based in Florida, and Southern Elegance estimated last month they attract about 270,000 people total each year to Little River, a small community reeling from a boom in coastal growth and development. Each passenger spends about USD 120 per trip, they say.

New fees could generate about USD 2 million in new annual revenue for Horry County, according to County Attorney John

Weaver.

On Monday, the new gambling ship was generating new interest around town, said Jonathan „Vinnie“ Vince, owner of the Cockney Cheddar, a restaurant and bar on the Little River waterfront.

Vince said he hopes the county will use any new taxes on the boats to improve parking and roads around the waterfront and Little River.

Next door, T.W.'s Bar and Grill could be seeing an increase in business, co-owner Tommy Fulghum said.

„It will definitely increase traffic down here,“ Fulghum said.

Casino-boat passengers often stop in to T.W.'s between cruises and help bolster the grill's business with local patrons, he said.