

Owner backs a winner as casino gets the go-ahead

Councillors have finally given the go-ahead for a GBP 2million casino to open in a historic church building in the heart of Aberdeen.

Members of the city council's licensing board yesterday gave permission to the owner of Soul in Union Street to convert the upper floor into a luxury gaming centre which will provide about 80 jobs.

The application was the third to come before the board since last year.

Councillors voted five to two in favour of the project at the property, formally known as Langstane Kirk, despite strong opposition from other casino operators in the city.

Representatives for The International Casino in Queen's Road, Gala and Grosvenor, which is planning to open a centre at Shiprow, argued there was gross oversupply of gaming in Aberdeen where interest in the activity was waning.

Laurence Tough, who represented the International Development Company which owns the International Casino, said the imposing building was „unsuitable for purpose“ in terms of its location, layout and character.

George Tester, a director of The International Casino, expressed road safety concerns because the building is at a major junction and beside a pedestrian crossing.

His colleague George Stewart argued that the other two operating casinos in Aberdeen would feel under pressure to sell cut price alcohol to compete if it opened, a move that would not help reduce antisocial behaviour in the city.

Committee members, following nearly an hour of debate in private, voted in favour of Granite Rock Casino, however.

The company is run by city businessman Stuart Clarkson, who has wanted to convert the upper floors of his bar into a casino for four years.

Speaking after the decision was made at the Town and County Hall, he said he was delighted and surprised that the vote had been in his favour.

„I came in here bracing myself for the worst because I am used to being refused,“ Mr Clarkson added.

„I am pleased we have at last got the licence through and I feel confident that this will be a fantastic facility for Aberdeen.

„I know that between me and my partner Hytham Bedawi, we will provide a facility that is unavailable in Aberdeen at the present moment.“

The casino, which will have its own entrance in Bon Accord Street, will have provision for six roulette tables, three blackjack tables, two poker tables, one Punto Banco table and 21 electronic roulette machines.

Mr Clarkson is proposing to offer a valet parking and a courtesy coach service for customers.

Novice players will be shown the ropes on a „learn to play“ table which embraces the casino’s customer education programme and social responsibility policy, which encourages and promotes responsible gaming.

A bar and dining area will be installed with the restaurant used as a card room in the early evenings and quieter days of the week.

The building’s mezzanine floor will be converted into office

space.

Mr Clarkson's legal representative at the meeting, Michael Messant, said a disabled roller ramp and a lift will be installed in the building to improve access.

He told board members that Punto Banco would be a new game that is currently not available in Aberdeen.

„It is my client's firm belief there is unsatisfied demand in this area (casino business) and he is committed to long-term investment which will create 80 new jobs,“ he said.

He added that it was perverse that the city's other casino operators had banded together to oppose Mr Clarkson's proposals.

Planning permission and building control certificates has already been secured and construction will begin in the near future.

The project, which will be undertaken by local contractors, is expected to take several months.