

Casino ship loses bid for new zone

Freeport – The owners of Texas Star Casino have been dealt a pair of rejections in its efforts to put gamblers on its boat.

City Council voted 3-2 to reject a rezoning request for the block of Sailfish Drive at which the boat is docked. The rezoning from manufacturing to waterfront, which was unanimously recommended by the city's planning commission, would have allowed the board to take on passengers and begin gambling operations.

Councilman Clan Cameron said he voted against the rezoning proposal Monday because he does not want to a gambling to launch in the city.

"It was obvious the public wasn't too happy with the gambling boat being here, and I was elected to respond to the voters," he said. "Besides, this is the third gambling operation to come through, and they haven't gotten their act together. Initially, I didn't realize this rezoning was to get the gambling on-line. Once I realized what it was, I couldn't support it."

The boat's owners now will have to wait until March to seek a conditional-use permit before gambling cruises could begin. Its previous conditional-use permit request was rejected by City Council, and the owners must wait a year to apply again.

Larry Kirkland, Texas Star Casino's director of operations, said the company has lost a great deal of money while waiting for permission to take on gamblers.

"The real question isn't how much money we will lose until March, we've already lost a lot of money since the special-use permit expired," Kirkland said. "Right now we're just getting

things in line so that when March comes around, we'll be ready."

Kirkland said he was disappointed by council's decision because the casino's parking and docking land are adjacent to waterfront zones.

"It's a more practical zoning for a boat, to have it zoned as an area allowing docking," he said.

Mismanagement by previous Texas Star Casino leadership is the source of the past problems, and the company is busy rebuilding its operations and reputation, Kirkland said.

"It's been nine months since we fired the last manager. It's welcoming not to hear people complain about him," Kirkland said. "He gave the company a black eye through unprofessional behavior and bad business decisions."

In giving its approval, the planning commission looked only at the use of the land to ensure a change to waterfront zoning was consistent and that the casino land was not being selectively zoned, said commission member Diane Williams. She was visibly frustrated with council members because she thought they were ignoring the work of the commission in making a fair recommendation.

"We worked very long and hard on this, just looking at land use," Williams said during Monday's council meeting. "There was no mention of the gambling boat when we were told to come up with a recommendation for the council. But now, after we have made the recommendation, it's all about the boat – the point got totally twisted around."