

Barden's casino unlikely to open until '09

You can pretty much forget about playing slot machines in Pittsburgh next year. It doesn't look like Don Barden's Majestic Star casino will open until 2009.

Given that construction has yet to start at the North Shore site, casino spokesman Bob Oltmanns acknowledged yesterday that odds were stacked against a 2008 opening.

„I don't see how it is possible with a 16-month construction schedule,“ he said.

Mr. Oltmanns refused to speculate on a new timetable for the casino opening. Even if Mr. Barden and his company, PITG Gaming LLC, broke ground on the casino tomorrow, it would not open until early 2009 based on a 16-month construction.

At one time, Mr. Barden had hoped to open the casino, to be built on the Ohio River shore between Carnegie Science Center and the West End Bridge, in March 2008. Officials later pushed the opening date back to mid- to late 2008.

Both timetables proved optimistic. Mr. Barden did not get clearance to build the casino until July when the state Supreme Court rejected appeals filed by the losing bidders and upheld the Dec. 20, 2006, state Gaming Control Board decision to award him the license.

Another factor, Mr. Oltmanns said, were appeals filed by the Steelers and Pirates relating to city planning commission approvals of the casino master plan and foundation and steel work, based on traffic concerns.

Common Pleas President Judge Joseph James now is trying to referee those disputes in a process ordered by the state

Supreme Court.

„Certainly everybody is anxious to get started with this and we have been for a very long time,“ Mr. Oltmanns said. „But we have come to understand and appreciate the public process and how every avenue for appeal that was legislated into the gaming law seems to have been exercised.“

The casino also is awaiting approval from the state Department of Environmental Protection for the storm water runoff permits it needs to get started on demolition and site work at the 17-acre parcel.

Mr. Oltmanns said the applications for those permits were submitted more than three months ago but still have not been approved.

„It’s not been one thing that slowed us down. It’s been a series of things. Just as soon as you think you’ve turned the corner, there’s an oncoming truck,“ he said.

State DEP spokeswoman Helen Humphreys said the agency is still waiting to review a draft sewage plan the casino must submit to the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority. Once that plan has been submitted, reviewed and approved, the DEP will issue the permits the casino needs, she said.

„We’ve met with [PITG Gaming and its] consultants and discussed these issues and they seemed to understand,“ she said.

The delay in opening the casino is unlikely to have any impact on the city budget. The city was not counting on any money from the slots palace in 2008.

At least for now, it shouldn’t have any impact on Mr. Barden’s obligation to supply USD 7.5 million annually for 30 years to help fund the USD 290 million arena being built for the Penguins and other events. Mr. Barden’s payments are not set

to start until Oct. 1, 2009.

Nor is the delay expected to affect financing for the USD 450 million casino, Mr. Oltmanns said. He added it hasn't been for the lack of trying that the casino opening has been pushed back.

„We've done everything we could do short of just ignoring the public process and proceeding with construction, which I don't think is in anyone's best interest to do,“ he said.

Mr. Barden could face more delays because of concerns over the size and look of a 3,800-space parking garage that will be built behind the casino. He has twice postponed public hearings before the planning commission on the design.

A number of organizations and public officials, including Mayor Luke Ravenstahl and Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato, have raised fears about the impact the garage could have on postcard views of the city skyline from Mount Washington and the Fort Pitt Bridge.