

For Casino Owner, Winning a License Was Not a Matter of Luck

Pittsburgh – Don H. Barden could have scheduled the groundbreaking for his USD 450 million casino on his 64th birthday, Dec. 20, if he wanted. After all, he owns what is projected to be the most lucrative of Pennsylvania's 14 slots casino licenses.

But already irritated by a year's worth of delays, Mr. Barden, the country's only African-American owner of a national gambling company, decided against that.

"I didn't want to lose two weeks of the good weather" for construction, he said before the ceremony on Tuesday along the banks of the Ohio River, where his Majestic Star casino will rise.

It was a landmark day for Mr. Barden, a soft-spoken, sometimes prickly Horatio Alger figure who grew up poor with 12 siblings in the Detroit suburb of Inkster, the son of auto workers and the great-grandson of a freed slave. The new casino is projected to nearly double his Detroit company's annual revenue, pushing it over USD 1 billion.

"This is a great day for our company, and this is a great day for me," Mr. Barden told a cheering crowd of about 300 local officials, friends and family.

In an industry known for its glitz, Mr. Barden "flies pretty much below the radar, and I think he likes that," said Andy Holtmann, editor of Casino Journal, a magazine based in Las Vegas, where Mr. Barden owns a casino. "The operators here in Vegas probably don't think of Don Barden at all."

Mr. Barden has been a millionaire since the 1980s and a casino owner for 12 years, with six casinos in five states. But it was how he won Pittsburgh's only license that caught people's attention, beating two major companies in the gambling industry, Harrah's and Isle of Capri.

Harrah's site on the South Side had traffic problems, and Isle of Capri's downtown site abutted a residential neighborhood. But Mr. Barden's 12-acre riverfront site has highway access and is separated from residences. It was no accident that he chose that site.

"Unlike the others who were running around trying to establish political influence, I was busy doing my homework," said Mr. Barden, who keeps in his pocket a wad of cash held together with a rubber band.

It was also no accident that Mr. Barden ended up in Pittsburgh. He helped win passage of legislation to permit gambling in Pennsylvania and had worked with the owner of the casino site.

The casino, he said, will provide jobs for about 1,000 people and, besides the tax revenue it will generate, will give the city USD 7.5 million a year for 30 years to help build an indoor arena.

"We're here to bring positive change," he said. "We're here to do good things."

To see Mr. Barden's résumé, which includes jobs in music, cable television, development and automobile sales, it might seem by chance that he ended up here as a casino mogul. But he always had a plan, establishing new goals every five years. "When he was a very young guy I just knew that he was going to be something," said his older sister, Helen, 67. "He just had that drive and that energy."

After sleeping four to a bed with his brothers, he started

college in Ohio but realized he could not afford to continue and moved to Lorain, Ohio, where his older brother, Bernie, was working at the local Ford factory. But following his brother and his parents' life path was not for him.

"I didn't want to go to work for Ford," he said, "because I would have been in a factory and I would have felt trapped, because that's typically what young African-Americans do. Get a job in a factory that pays good money. Then they get into debt with a car, a house or apartment, and then they get married."

After two years working in the offices of a local shipyard, rapidly moving up from the mailroom to an assistant in the president's office, Mr. Barden set out on his own.

"I figured I'd give myself 10 years trying to be an entrepreneur. If I didn't see the light at the end of the tunnel, I could always go at 30 to 32 and get a job in the factory and still retire at the same time as all my fellow mates," he said.

If Inkster was where Mr. Barden's character was formed, it was in Lorain where he was schooled in business. There, he found a melting pot of nationalities where a business-minded black man, though still a distinct minority, was embraced by the business community.

"He was a kid with no money and no background except a desire and vision to succeed," said Carl Adams, a former newspaper publisher and bank director in Lorain whom Mr. Barden considers a mentor. "He never took advantage of his race. He didn't have to."

Still, for Mr. Barden, whose company was listed as the sixth-largest black-owned industrial/service company in the country this year by Black Enterprise magazine, race is always a factor, said Bella Marshall, his wife of 19 years.

Part of his drive, she said, is that “he believes he was given an opportunity, particularly as an African-American, so he should do the best he can do.”

Smaller successes in development in Lorain, and then getting the cable franchise in his hometown, Inkster, led to the project that set Mr. Barden on his way – winning the franchise for Detroit’s cable system in 1983.

Foreseeing consolidation, Mr. Barden sold his Detroit franchise in 1995 to Comcast for USD 115 million – giving him the capital he needed to build a casino in Gary, Ind.

Now, on the verge of his biggest project, Mr. Barden harbors hopes of buying a casino in Detroit and, maybe, in Lorain.

“A lot of his future really hinges on how things go in Pittsburgh,” Mr. Holtmann of Casino Journal said. “He has a lot riding on this.”