

Ohio casino battle heating up with TV, radio ads

The owner of an Indiana casino near the Ohio border is joining the fight against a ballot issue that would ask voters to allow a USD 600 million casino resort in southwest Ohio.

If the issue makes the Nov. 4 ballot, voters would decide whether to amend the Ohio Constitution to allow a casino resort off Interstate 71 near Wilmington, about halfway between Cincinnati and Columbus.

Backers of the project claim it would create at least 5,000 jobs and produce income for each of Ohio's 88 counties.

But Penn National Gaming Inc., based in Wyomissing, Pa., argues the deal would create a monopoly by authorizing only one casino statewide. It wants access to Ohio through gaming at its Raceway Park in Toledo. The Pennsylvania-based company owns Argosy Casino in Lawrenceburg, Ind., near Cincinnati.

The organization promoting the casino development, MyOhioNow.com, is urging Ohio voters not to be fooled by a TV and radio campaign that started Tuesday night in the state's big cities.

But Penn National is concerned about losing business, said Rick A. Lertzman, MyOhioNow.com co-founder. Lertzman said he expects that an Ohio casino would take between 40 percent and 50 percent of the USD 480 million in annual revenues generated by gamblers going to Argosy.

Penn National's Argosy is the largest of three casinos in southeast Indiana that draw heavily from the Cincinnati area and northern Kentucky. Other companies operate the two smaller casinos, Belterra and Grand Victoria.

Penn National is the nation's third-largest gambling company

with revenue in excess of USD 2 billion a year. It is funding a group called No On 6 – if the casino proposal makes the ballot it would be listed as Issue 6.

A conservative public-policy group, Ohio Roundtable, is also opposing the casino development in Ohio.

Ohio voters have a history of strongly rejecting casino proposals.

Bob Tenenbaum, a spokesman for No On 6, said the group won't oppose gambling generally but rather has concerns about the current proposed ballot measure. Tenenbaum said ballot language could allow the casino to escape its promised 30 percent tax obligation if it is considered an American Indian casino.

MyOhioNow.com partner Brad Pressman said the involvement of a rival gambling interest changes „the entire way the campaign is going to proceed,“ although he and Lertzman said they can't afford to spend more than the USD 14 million they had budgeted for the campaign.

Meanwhile, petitions needed to put the issue on the ballot are drawing questions. At least seven people who submitted petitions in northeast Ohio's Lake County acknowledged they signed as circulators but did not witness any of the signatures on the documents, said County Board of Elections Director Jan Clair. The circulators also signed blank petitions that were later sent around the state, Clair said.