

CASINO MAKING EARLY PLANS FOR TABLE GAMES

By: JAMES MCGINNIS Bucks County Courier Times

Pending legislation would allow for the placement of poker, craps, roulette and other table games in the new casino as well as the racetrack grandstands. Philadelphia Park Casino might use part of its racetrack grandstands to house poker, roulette, craps and other table games if approved by the state, Greenwood Gaming CEO Robert Green said Wednesday.

Green testified at a local hearing called by the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board. The state is reviewing operations at Philadelphia Park before it votes on whether to renew the casino's license, which was first issued in December 2006. A decision is expected sometime next month.

Meanwhile, pending legislation to expand gambling would allow for the placement of table games in Pennsylvania casinos as well as the grandstands, and Philadelphia Park "likes that idea," said Tom Bonner, vice president of the casino.

The Pennsylvania Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association has objected to use of the grandstands as a slots parlor. Some racing fans have balked at the existing layout at the racino. The bottom two floors were converted into a temporary casino. The third floor remains a betting area for the races.

Philadelphia Park is scheduled to open a new standalone casino in December and fully relocate all its slot machines to the new building by spring. This week, the casino also applied to the state to increase the number of slots from 2,912 to 4,000.

Representatives from the horsemen's association declined immediate comment on the potential for table games in the grandstands. "It's an issue that we need to examine further," said organization spokesman Pete Peterson. "We are concerned about the potential that it would siphon customers away from horse racing."

Philadelphia Park said it has spent twice the amount required by the state to improve the racetrack's dormitories, which house about 200 workers, and its barns, which house more than 1,400 horses. The casino said it will spend \$25 million to upgrade racing areas and recently paid \$1.2 million to install a four-story video screen in the middle of the racetrack.

Despite those improvements, total betting at the track has dropped. At-track betting on live Philadelphia Park races fell 8 percent after the slot machines were added, according to statistics from the Pennsylvania Racing Commission. At-track betting on simulcast races also fell 10 percent during that time, according to the PRC.

Racing Director Joe Wilson said he believes those declines are a result of the recession and the recent smoking ban.

The economy has not stifled slots play, though, and Philadelphia Park continues to lead the state's casinos in betting.

Slots play at Philadelphia Park has so far generated nearly \$500 million in revenues for the state and the horse racing industry, the company said.

Alan Kohler, attorney for Philadelphia Park, said there was "overwhelming evidence in the case for renewal" of the slots license. "We've been able to generate more revenue than any other casino whether it be temporary or permanent in the state," Kohler said.

The company also employs 514 people and said it took proactive steps to ensure that 29 percent are minorities and 41 percent are women. Fewer than 15 percent of its employees live outside the state, the casino said.

Representatives from the gaming control board said they were convinced Philadelphia Park had worked to address any concerns of state regulators.

The state fined the casino last year after children gained access to the gaming floor. Bonner said the layout of the new casino building should make it easier to monitor who gets in.

Recently the state Liquor Control Board cited Philadelphia Park for serving alcohol to an intoxicated patron.

"We promptly initiated training programs and re-training programs for our beverage service personnel," Bonner said.

No residents spoke during public comment at Wednesday's hearing in the Bensalem town hall.

Bensalem Mayor Joseph DiGirolamo called the casino a "great neighbor" and said the township had not experienced significant traffic problems or any serious crime since the slots parlor opened.

Salvatore DeBunda of the horsemen's association testified Wednesday that the organization supports the renewal of Philadelphia Park's slots license. But he used his testimony to blast cuts to the state horsemen's fund.

The association calculates a loss of \$50 million a year for the horsemen's fund, under the recently passed 2010 state budget. That budget diverts 2 percent of slot machine revenue from the horsemen's fund into the state's general fund. The racing industry benefits from a 12 percent tax on the slots, but there is no plan to give the horsemen any cut from the tables.

State Sen. Tommy Tomlinson, R-6, said his table games bill is meant to create jobs. "I want to try to create 10,000 jobs from the table games," he said. "If you want to create more jobs, I think we need to keep that (table games tax) rate low."

License renewals are required under state law. Earlier hearings for Harrah's Chester Downs in Chester County and Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs in Wilkes-Barre each drew about a dozen residents, McGarvey said. Mohegan Sun's license was renewed; Harrah's still is going through the process.