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Connecticut Casino Developer Joins Proposal For Gambling Complex In Holyoke, Mass.

Plan Must Compete Against Others In Western Massachusetts

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By MATTHEW STURDEVANT, msturdevant@courant.com
The Hartford Courant
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A Connecticut developer wants to build a casino in Holyoke, Mass., in collaboration with a major western Massachusetts businessman.

The proposal is a joint venture by Connecticut-based **Waterford** Group LLC and Eric Suher, who owns Mountain Park, a 60-acre former amusement park in Holyoke. The partners hope to build a complex that in addition to a casino would include a 350-room hotel, an indoor-outdoor concert venue, and a convention center.

On Monday, Holyoke Mayor Alex B. Morse held a press conference to say he is open to the idea of a casino in his city, an about-face from his anti-casino stance when he was elected last year. Morse stopped short of endorsing the project, saying there is no agreement and the city is only considering the idea.

At times during the press conference he had to speak over hecklers upset by his casino reversal.

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The proposal would need to clear the Massachusetts Gaming Commission in a process pitting this plan against others in western Massachusetts — including three in Springfield. The commission won't approve any casino until early 2014, and only one will be allowed in the western part of the state.

Suher, a Holyoke native, sought out Waterford Group principals Len and Mark Wolman. Suher also owns a number of properties in western Massachusetts and Iron Horse Entertainment Group.

"They've got a great track record," Suher said. "I wanted partners



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that could understand what my vision would be, and they got it right from the very beginning. They're local. They're not from Las Vegas. They're not from Florida. They're here."

Waterford Group was a partner with the Mohegan tribe 20 years ago in creating the \$300 million Mohegan Sun gambling complex in Uncasville. Waterford Group and its affiliated businesses have been involved in developing hotels, casinos, racetracks and restaurants in at least four states. The company runs convention centers and hotels, including the Hilton Hartford, the Hartford Marriott Downtown, and the Residence Inn Hartford Downtown.

Waterford Group Chairman Len Wolman said in a prepared statement released Monday: "We have been in negotiations with Eric Suher and city officials in Holyoke on a casino proposal. We look forward to continuing those conversations and hope to finalize the details on this exciting project. We will provide further information as it becomes available."

Morse, the Holyoke mayor, said western Massachusetts will have a casino one way or another. It would be to Holyoke's advantage to have the casino in Holyoke rather than allow Springfield to build one without trying to compete, he said.

The Holyoke proposal would also be competing with a bid by Mohegan Sun to open a casino in Palmer, Mass.

At a press conference Monday, Morse said: "Map out driving directions on your favorite GPS. Springfield's casino would be 15 minutes from Holyoke city hall. One at Mountain Park would be 12. We share one metropolitan area, and I cannot assume that our city boundaries will provide us any protection from a casino down the road."

During his successful mayoral campaign in 2011, Morse was anti-casino, and protesters at his press conference Monday shouted at him, calling him a coward and other names.

But Morse said the current plan was unlike one offered previously by Hard Rock International, owner of Hard Rock Café, and Paper City Development LLC. Morse said he opposed several aspects of that plan, which would have brought a Hard Rock Hotel & Casino to the current site of Wyckoff Country Club in Holyoke.

A spokeswoman for Hard Rock on Monday declined to comment on the mayor's position or its future plans.

Casino developers are in a scramble to claim territory in Massachusetts, where a Jan. 15 deadline looms for initial proposals to build three casinos in the state, one in each of three geographic territories: western Massachusetts, Greater **Boston**, and southeastern Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Gaming Commission, created last year, will consider proposals by developers and will decide in early 2014 which gambling facilities may proceed with their plans.

"We anticipate a license will be awarded by February 2014," said Elaine Driscoll, director of communications for the Massachusetts Gaming Commission.

Separately, the state will allow one slot-machine venue somewhere

in Massachusetts.

Morse, the Holyoke mayor, said during the press conference that the city doesn't have an agreement and there haven't been any "back room" deals.

Mountain Park was an amusement park from 1894 to 1987 on the side of Mount Tom, a ski resort from 1962 to 1998. Suher, who grew up in Holyoke, bought Mountain Park in 2006.

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In a phone interview Monday, Suher said, "We were doing outdoor shows at Look Park, primarily at Look Park up in Northampton, and the facility was very limiting in that there were only specific days that we were able to do events, and there was also a much smaller capacity of 2,000 people."

He cleaned up Mountain Park and since 2009 has operated it as a music venue with outdoor performances by **Willie Nelson, Jackson Browne, The Flaming Lips, Counting Crows**, Disco Biscuits and Gov't Mule.

For Suher, a casino and convention center would broaden the entertainment options in western Massachusetts while revitalizing Holyoke, a struggling city that long ago lost most of its industry.

"We grew up skiing at Mount Tom every day after school, because it had night skiing ... and we also grew up at Mountain Park, as did all of the Holyoke residents and all of my friends," Suher said. "We all grew up working at either Mountain Park or Mount Tom."

"And, so, you know, slowly all the amenities that we were so accustomed to as kids just went away. And there was just this apathy in town, where no one really thought it was going to happen, but then, when it did happen, people were just in disbelief. But yet nobody was able to do anything."

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