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### **Holyoke Mayor Alex B. Morse backs new casino proposal in reversal of anti-casino stand**

Nov 24, 2012 04:21 PM

By Mark Arsenault Globe Staff

In a surprising reversal of his steadfast anti-casino position, Holyoke Mayor Alex B. Morse plans to announce Monday that he is supporting a proposal to develop a gambling resort off Route 91 in his economically struggling city, potentially realigning the competition for the sole resort casino license in Western Massachusetts.

“I think we’re all realizing that casinos are coming to Western Mass., and Holyoke cannot sit on the sidelines,” Morse said in an interview to discuss his pivot on the casino issue.

Morse backs a new plan to build a casino resort at Mountain Park, an outdoor concert venue at the site of a defunct amusement park, north of downtown Holyoke on the side of Mt. Tom.

The park’s owner, Holyoke resident and businessman Eric Suher, is negotiating to develop a casino on the land in partnership with Len and Mark Wolman, Suher said in an interview. The Wolmans are top executives of the Waterford Group, a Connecticut company that was a partner in developing Mohegan Sun casino.

“We feel very, very confident we have a solid operating and financial partnership that will be announced in the near future,” Suher said.

The addition of a Holyoke proposal would intensify the battle for the most sought-after casino license in the state.

Three major casino operators -- Ameristar, MGM Resorts International, and Penn National Gaming -- have proposed major gambling resorts in Springfield, each estimated by the developers to cost \$800 million or more. Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno has established a citywide competition to whittle the number of projects to one or two. Downtown Springfield is about 12 miles south on Route 91 from the proposed Holyoke site.

The current operators of Mohegan Sun also intend to pursue the Western Massachusetts license,

with a project planned for Palmer.

Morse campaigned for mayor in 2011 on an anti-casino platform, defeating incumbent Elaine Pluta. He took office last January at age 22, making headlines for his youth.

At the time Morse won the job, Hard Rock International was planning a Holyoke casino at the Wyckoff Country Club, and Morse's election was seen as a blow to those plans. After failing to persuade the new mayor to support the project, the company moved on. Hard Rock considered entering the Springfield casino sweepstakes but did not meet the city's deadline for a proposal. The company continues to look for land in Massachusetts, and has been linked to a possible casino site in Everett.

Morse remained opposed as recently as this fall. In a commentary published in October by Commonwealth Magazine, Morse argued "a casino in Holyoke would not aid in our economic rebirth, but would ultimately undermine the effort."

But his position began evolving in recent weeks after Suher quietly shared his Mountain Park proposal with the mayor. "The more I heard about the specific plan Eric had outlined, the more it resonated," Morse said.

The mayor expects some supporters will be upset with his about-face. In a copy of remarks he plans to deliver in Holyoke on Monday, Morse included a line attributed to economist John Maynard Keynes: "When the facts change, I change my mind." He urged supporters to "stick with us."

Morse said he believes his city could be hurt by a Springfield casino, which could take customers from Holyoke businesses.

"The fact that, inevitably, a casino will be coming to our region does not mean we should settle for what has so far been offered," the mayor's prepared remarks say.

In addition to a gambling floor, the Mountain Park proposal calls for a 350-room hotel, convention center, performance amphitheaters, and restaurants. Morse said the proposal would also provide opportunities for outdoor recreation, such as hiking and canoeing around Mt. Tom. It would propose a new highway interchange off Route 91.

Suher could not provide an estimated budget for the project, but state law requires a minimum investment of \$500 million.

The mayor insisted that the Mountain Park plan is different -- and superior -- to what Hard Rock had proposed in Holyoke. "Hard Rock's plan was a casino in a box," he said. "Eric's plan is more of a resort with a gaming component as part of it." The new plan also more effectively deals with traffic and would not disrupt residential neighborhoods, he said.

State campaign finance reports show that Morse received a \$350 contribution from Suher in December 2011.

The mayor said he intends to negotiate an agreement with Suher and his partners for the city to host a resort casino. Such a deal is required under state law before the project can move forward.

City voters will have the final say on whether Holyoke will entertain a casino -- no gambling proposal can be licensed unless the project wins the endorsement of local voters in a referendum.

Suher bought the roughly 70-acre site in 2006, he said. In 2009, he opened a seasonal outdoor concert venue on the land. Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson, and Bonnie Raitt have all played there. He said the site offers an ideal location for a casino resort: "Off Route 91 and also tucked away, so we believe it will not harm any neighborhoods or downtown Holyoke."

The state gambling commission controls three resort casino licenses -- one each for three regions of the state -- and one license for a slot parlor that can be built anywhere. The licenses are supposed to be awarded through competitive bids, though all of the competition so far has emerged in the west.

The Greater Boston region has just one formal applicant, Suffolk Downs in East Boston. Commercial casino development in the southeastern region is on hold to allow the Mashpee Wampanoag time to make progress on a tribal casino.

The state deadline is Jan. 15 for commercial developers to apply for casino licenses and to submit extensive financial and personnel documents to the commission.

The five-member commission will choose each of the winning projects, with decisions not expected until early 2014.

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