



Palmer officials, disappointed with Mohegan Sun public forum, say casino company offered little new information about proposed hotel-casino



By [Conor Berry, The Republican](#)

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[PALMER](#) — If the town of Palmer is going to marry [Mohegan Sun](#), and that marriage is going to produce a roughly \$800 million destination resort casino, Town Council President Philip J. Hebert wants a prenuptial agreement.

"They've been courting us all these years – let's get a prenup," Hebert said at Monday's Town Council meeting, eliciting chuckles from some colleagues on the governing board. "It's a very frustrating thing," he said, expressing what many have described as a lack of detailed information about the proposed project.

Since that meeting, however, Hebert has spoken with Paul Brody, vice president of development at Mohegan Sun, and says he now has a better understanding of why the Connecticut-based casino company is holding its cards close to the vest. But, Hebert added, he still feels Mohegan could be a bit more forthcoming about its proposal to build a hotel-casino complex on 152 acres bordering Route 32 in Palmer.

Mohegan has been planning a casino in Palmer since 2007, receiving early support from many residents and citizens from other parts of eastern Hampden County. However, even strong casino supporters like Paul E. Burns, an at-large Palmer councilor who formerly held Hebert's president position, have publicly voiced frustration. "I think they really need to step up and demonstrate some level of openness to the public," Burns said Wednesday.

He, like many others, was disappointed with Mohegan Sun's [March 4 public forum](#) at Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School, where anticipation had been running high that more details would be released, including information about preliminary traffic plans for the project. Many left the meeting with unanswered questions, including town councilors. "I think that they could have been much more forthcoming," Burns said.

Town councilors revisited the topic at their meeting Monday, with most board members expressing disappointment and some suggesting more involvement from the council.

Barbara A. Barry, vice president of the council, said, "I think we're all frustrated. We all probably left that meeting thinking 'That's all we get?'"

However, Barry also believes negotiations surrounding a host community agreement – a state requirement for all four casino companies seeking to build gaming complexes in Western Massachusetts – should continue without any interference. "I think we need to just let it play out right now," she said. "We've had the meeting; they've revealed a little more ... They're driving the bus."

That remark prompted a quick response from Hebert, who said, "I don't like sitting in the passenger seat."

Mohegan Sun officials who attended the Pathfinder forum, which doubled as a regular Town Council meeting, promised to have more details in time for a townwide referendum on the project. That vote could take place as early as June, officials have said. "We will have a bigger, better, more exciting project with more amenities," Mitchell G. Etes, CEO of Mohegan Tribal Gaming Authority, told the large crowd that turned up at Pathfinder hungry for specifics.

Etes offered little new project information at the session, other than to say Mohegan will ante up an additional \$200 million in amenities to the \$600 million it has already proposed for the project. The additional investment puts Mohegan's plan on par with competing Springfield casinos proposed by MGM Resorts International and Penn National Gaming, and a West Springfield casino proposed by Hard Rock International. Price tags for those three projects range from \$700 million to \$800 million.

Etes declined to give specific information about the proposed additional amenities, saying Mohegan did not want to tip its hand to competitors seeking the sole casino gaming license designated for Western Massachusetts.

The Town Council is particularly interested in preliminary traffic plans for the project, but Mohegan has yet to offer details. Councilor Mary Salzmann suggested writing a letter to the casino company requesting even "skeletal" plans, while Burns said he believes the town should seek the "most comprehensive plan available."

Hebert, a former competitive dirt bike rider, said Mohegan needs to regain ground it has lost in the great Western Massachusetts casino race. "You got to get out in front of the pack, then settle down your pace and let them go by you. Then, you got to twist that throttle. Twisting the throttle, to me, is regaining that pro-casino support," he said. "I want to see tangible stuff so that the public can feel confident."

Brody says various studies, including for traffic and sewer plans, are still under way. "We're in the midst of completing them," he said Wednesday. Completed studies will be given to the negotiating team handling host community discussions, he said.

In terms of the alleged dearth of specific information about the project, Brody says Mohegan will keep certain information quiet until the state casino selection process advances.

"We're timing our disclosure to best serve our efforts to secure the license," he said.

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