



## Massachusetts gaming leaders urge casinos to negotiate agreements with communities near a planned a resort



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BOSTON — Massachusetts gaming officials on Wednesday moved to resolve the thorny issue of which communities can negotiate agreements with a [casino](#) planned in a nearby or neighboring city or town.

As part of a debate about dozens of key policy questions, the [Massachusetts Gaming Commission](#) examined a section of the state's casino law that allows for so-called "surrounding communities." If a municipality is designated as a surrounding community, it can ink agreements with casino companies for education money, road improvements or other ways to offset the effects of a resort outside their borders.

Stephen P. Crosby, chairman of the gaming commission, said casino applicants should identify surrounding communities and work with those cities and towns.

The [five-member commission](#) – also including Bruce Stebbins, Gayle Cameron, Enrique Zuniga and James F. McHugh – voted to issue guidelines by the end of January that would help developers and communities decide which cities and towns receive the status of a "surrounding community" and therefore the right to reach agreements a developer.

"We will try to give enough guidance that the applicant and the community can work it out in advance, pretty much knowing where we would go," said Crosby.

Under the law, communities such as [Springfield](#), which would host a casino, get to negotiate agreements with casino companies and then put those agreements up for a vote.

The law also calls for similar agreements with "surrounding communities," but it doesn't define precisely what constitutes a surrounding community. Surrounding communities also don't get to vote on a casino.



Members of the five-person Massachusetts Gaming Commission, from left, are: Enrique Zuniga, James F. McHugh, Chairman Stephen Crosby, speaking, Bruce Stebbins, and Gayle Cameron.

AP Photo by Josh Reynolds

Instead, the law provides some general details of what defines a surrounding community and encourages casino developers to reach agreements with those communities. Those agreements would need to be submitted as part of a license application to the commission.

The commission's upcoming guidance could include whether a shared border determines a surrounding community, or whether a local feeder road could prompt the designation. The commission will also consider what weight to give to factors such as impacts on police and fire, housing, schools, water and sewer systems.

"Communities shouldn't get greedy and the applicant shouldn't be too stingy," Crosby added. "They ought to try to figure out what the significant negative impacts are and address them."

If a city or town can't reach agreement with a developer, then it can appeal to the commission after the casino files its application.

If the commission itself designates "a surrounding community," then a city or town gets 30 days to seal a deal with a nearby proposed casino, while no action is taken on the application in the meantime. If no agreement comes after 30 days, the commission must move to close the talks and ensure "a fair and reasonable" deal with a surrounding community.

"We will be encouraging them to be proactive about it, not to be held up," Crosby said "It will slow down the licensing process a lot if we have to send them out to arbitration."

Developers planning casinos, including the [Mohegan Sun](#) in Palmer, or [MGM Resorts](#) and [Penn National Gaming](#) in Springfield, could be facing the possibility of negotiating a half dozen or so agreements with surrounding communities.

Seven communities share a border with Palmer and each could potentially at least seek mitigation money or other concessions from a Palmer casino.

Springfield is also bordered by Chicopee, Longmeadow, Ludlow, East Longmeadow and Wilbraham, all potential surrounding communities if they can demonstrate an impact, said Stebbins, a former city councilor in Springfield.

"We really want to give some guidance to an applicant so the applicant can go out and do their work and talk to potential surrounding communities," Stebbins said.

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