



Casino traffic and engineering studies under way for Eastern States Exposition in West Springfield



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on December 14, 2012 at 7:59 PM, updated December 14, 2012 at 8:00 PM

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[WEST SPRINGFIELD](#) — Traffic and engineering studies are being conducted with an eye toward establishing a casino on the grounds of the [Eastern States Exposition](#) here, according to Town Councilor Brian J. Griffin.

Griffin, who heads the council's Casino Mitigation Study Committee, said Friday that Donald Chase, chairman of the organization's board, has assured him studies are underway.

Neither Chase, nor Eugene Cassidy, the exposition's president and chief executive officer, could be reached for comment. However, Cassidy's office acknowledged Thursday that the organization is [looking into siting a casino on the exposition's fairgrounds](#) on Memorial Avenue.

Griffin has said that [Hard Rock International](#) is looking into the possibility of putting a casino at the fairgrounds on Memorial Avenue, but officials for neither it nor the Eastern States Exposition will confirm that.

West Springfield Mayor Gregory Neffinger talks to reporters Friday about the possibility of siting a casino in West Springfield.
Don Treeger, The Republican

Mayor Gregory C. Neffinger has said that Hard Rock is among various casino companies that have expressed some interest in siting a casino in West Side, but that there have not been any concrete proposals.

Neffinger called a press conference for Friday afternoon during which he issued a press release stating that the city always welcomes interest from those who want to invest in the community.

"As an architect I am neither for nor against any proposal but will review all gaming plans to determine their positive aspects and to see what benefits may be brought to our community. We will also evaluate any negatives to see if they can be mitigated," the release states.

The mayor also noted that any casino would have to win the voters' approval at the polls.

"We'd like to see something that would benefit all of the surrounding communities," Neffinger said.

Griffin said his major concern about a possible casino is the effect it would have on traffic, an issue that many city residents who have called him have also echoed.

"I discussed concerns about traffic with Mr. Chase," the councilor said.

Griffin said that the Eastern State's Griffin attracts a total of about 1.7 million visitors to its 17-day Big E agricultural fair each fall. Studies have shown that casinos attract about 10,000 vehicles a day, which Griffin said should be less of an impact on traffic in the area than the popular, regional agricultural fair. The agricultural fair as well as the various trade shows and other events that take place on the 175-acre grounds would continue, according to the councilor.

Griffin noted that any buildings constructed for use by a casino would be subject to real estate taxes. He also speculated that the exposition might have a good chance at winning state approval to add a casino as the fairgrounds would lend themselves to a resort-type development.

In addition, Griffin said the city could negotiate a lucrative host benefit payment with casino operators to generate revenue for the city.

Griffin initiated formation of the Casino Mitigation Study Committee out of concern over competing casino projects that have been proposed for neighboring Springfield. He has expressed concern that a casino across the Connecticut River could have an impact on such areas as crime, traffic, school enrollment, housing and West Side businesses.

There are currently two proposals on the table to site casinos in neighboring Springfield. One is an \$800 million proposal by [MGM Resorts International](#) for the city's South End. The other is an \$807 million ventured offered by [Penn National Gaming](#) for a site on the North End that would include the current headquarters of The Republican.

Penn National on Friday [paid \\$650,000 in nonrefundable casino application fees](#) to the state and the city of Springfield. The nonrefundable fees, which were due Friday under Springfield's casino-selection process, are \$250,000 to the city of Springfield and \$400,000 to the Massachusetts Gaming Commission.

Cassidy's office in its statement Thursday said that his organization is "enthusiastically" exploring all options and may have a major announcement in the near future.

Noreen P. Tassinari, the exposition's director of marketing, said Friday Cassidy will have no further comment at this

time.

Hard Rock has dodged questions about whether it is exploring a venture at the fairgrounds. It's public relations firm issued a press release stating it is "highly interested" in new casino development opportunities and has evaluated a number of prospective locations. If it proceeds with development, Hard Rock expects it would meet all deadlines and requirements of the Massachusetts Gaming Commission, according to the statement.

Griffin has said that it would be premature for him to take a position for or against a casino being established.

The councilor said he wants to make sure the interests of residents and small businesses in the vicinity of the fairgrounds are looked after.

Brian J. Griffin

"I will not take a position until every single question is answered," the town councilor said.

Griffin said exposition officials are concerned that a casino complex in Springfield would draw trade shows and other events that currently take place at the fairgrounds.

Chicopee Mayor Michael D. Bissonnette said his city continues to have discussions with potential developers for three sites. "No formal plans have been presented, and I'm not sure if any of the plans will come to fruition," the mayor said.

"I will certainly entertain a proposal that is adequately financed and has the potential to deliver jobs to the city," he added.

Penn National becomes the fourth casino company to pay the fee to the gaming commission, said Elaine Driscoll, communications director for the gaming commission.

The gaming commission would award the sole casino license for Western Massachusetts. Springfield is planning to choose one or both of the companies for negotiating agreements that would need approval of city voters to advance to the gaming commission.

The [Mohegan Sun](#) is planning a casino in Palmer and would compete for the license in Western Massachusetts.

Meanwhile, Holyoke Mayor [Alex Morse](#) will hold a meeting Monday at 3:30 p.m. at the Holyoke Transportation Center at 206 Maple St. to discuss the regional benefits and burdens of a casino with officials from neighboring cities and towns.

Morse was elected last year on anti-casino platform. He recently changed his mind and began entertaining casino proposals, but reversed himself again this week and has withdrawn support of a gambling venture being developed in the Paper City.

Penn National will host a red carpet gala event Thursday beginning at 4:30 p.m. at the Paramount in Springfield to provide more details about its project. The company expects to invite various organizations, civic leaders and members of the business community.

The casino gambling law that took effect a year ago allows up to three casinos in the state, including one in Western Massachusetts. A state Gaming Commission will review proposals and award casino licenses with February of 2014 the target for issuing the first license.

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