

PLAINVILLE

Plainville inches closer to slot machine agreement

By Jose Martinez

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Plainville is getting closer to signing a host community agreement with Plainridge Racecourse, which wants slot machines to spice up the betting offered at the harness track.

Selectmen voted unanimously last week to hire Cummings Associates of Arlington to compile a report on the financial and social impacts of adding 1,250 slot machines to the simulcasting, live racing, and paramutuel wagering operation.

Will E. Cummings, president of the consulting group, said Plainridge's location, so close to Interstates 95 and 495 and Route 1, meets the "gold standard" in the gaming industry for customer convenience, but having slot machines near home carries certain social costs the town and state must plan for.

Studies indicate that spending on gambling doubles for problem gamblers when there is a gambling facility nearby, said Rachel Volberg, an expert on problem gambling who is working with Cummings. For people struggling with a gambling addiction, opening a slots parlor nearby can lead to more money trouble at home, domestic abuse, divorce, and problems in the workplace.

Other potential impacts range from increased town revenue to more traffic, drunken driving, and lower property values immediately surrounding the would-be slots parlor, the consultants said.

Plainridge is one of four applicants vying for a slots-only license before the Massachusetts Gaming Commission, while several other groups are competing for three full-blown casino resort licenses. A wild card in the game is the still-unresolved question of a Wampanoag casino in nearby Taunton.

The slots license is expected to be issued in September, commission spokeswoman Elaine Driscoll said. Casino licenses will follow next year.

Although only one slots license will be awarded, Plainridge's president, Gary Piontkowski, said he thinks his proposal to spend \$160 million sprucing up the racetrack to add 1,250 slot machines is way ahead of the competition. The track just completed the construction of a \$20 million parking garage and is in the final phase of a state-mandated environmental impact report.

"We are ready to go," Piontkowski said after the selectmen's meeting last week at Beatrice H. Wood Elementary School.

Piontkowski, the former state racing commission chairman under former governor William F. Weld, has made no secret of his desire to bring slot machines to Massachusetts over the last decade and, more specifically, to Plainridge, which reopens for harness racing this month for the 2013 season.

"We have everything in place except this agreement and the referendum," Piontkowski said. "We pulled our first permits in Plainville for this [expansion] in 2009. The garage is built. I figure we are 24 to 30 months ahead of everyone."

During the meeting, resident Thomas Keen cited a Connecticut study that indicated home values dropped 10 to 20 percent near state roads leading to casinos. In Plainville, where the average home price is just under \$300,000, that translates to hits of \$30,000 to \$60,000 for the average homeowner, he said.

"I believe it's a direct transfer of wealth from Plainville residents (who bear the brunt of the costs of a racino) to Plainridge (who reaps the benefits of a racino)," Keen said in an e-mail after the meeting. "However, I believe it's a critical cost that needs to be calculated, mitigated, and communicated so that Plainville residents know what they are getting themselves into based on the experience of our

neighbors.”

Gambling has grown across the United States since the 1970s, when only Atlantic City and the state of Nevada had casinos. Today, 18 states, including Massachusetts, permit commercial casino facilities while 15 others — including Connecticut — have tribal casinos, Cummings said.

Slot machines are the biggest draw, generating about 90 percent of revenue even at the largest casinos that offer blackjack, poker, roulette, and other table games, Cummings said.

That estimate may be a little high, according to the American Gaming Association, where spokeswoman Holly Wetzell said slot machine revenues are difficult to track nationally because not all states provide breakdowns by game.

“Whether they are at full-scale casinos or on their own at race tracks or, as some states have them, on a widespread basis,” Cummings said, “the public’s appetite for gambling at slot machines is enormous.”

Plainville residents probably already have experience with slots, since Twin River Casino is just a 30-minute drive away in Lincoln, R.I., Cummings said. The Rhode Island facility has 4,750 slot machines and will add table games this summer.

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