



## Big E Hard Rock West Springfield casino developer asserts project is 'means to a solution' to traffic issues

Eastern States Expo and Hard Rock International Announce Casino Partnership

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*(Gallery by Don Treeger, Republican staff photographer)*



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WEST SPRINGFIELD — Richard D. Bronson of The Bronson Companies, who waged a successful battle with Donald Trump to build a casino in Atlantic City, N.J., is the [Eastern States Exposition's](#) consultant as well as developer on a proposed [Hard Rock International resort casino](#) announced Friday.

Following a press conference at the Storowton Carriage House on the exposition grounds, Bronson agreed parking and traffic will be issues to surmount. "We have solutions that are very, very thorough," he said.

Mark Rivers, president of the Bronson Companies and the person Bronson described as the "quarterback" of the project, said the solutions could resolve long-standing parking and traffic issues around the fairgrounds.

"We do believe there needs to be a second means of egress that does not involve Memorial Avenue," Rivers said. "The project is the means to a solution."

The local consulting engineering firm Tighe and Bond has been hired to iron that out. Rivers acknowledged that a solution to the issue could involve egress from Route 5.

Eastern States Exposition CEO [Eugene Cassidy](#) announced the proposed \$700 million to \$800 million casino to be



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This rendering provided by Hard Rock International depicts a proposed casino in West Springfield. (Image by Hard Rock International)

[Hard Rock International unveils Eastern States Exposition casino proposal](#)

gallery (8 photos)

built on exposition grounds in partnership with Hard Rock International, calling it a “exciting once-in-a-lifetime economic opportunity.”

Cassidy made the announcement during a dazzling presentation and performance by actor, TV personality and Poison rock idol Bret Michaels to a crowd of about 200 at a “red-carpet” luncheon.

The project would involve 22 to 24 months of building that would create 1,500 construction jobs and 2,000 permanent jobs once completed, according to proponents. Binders of information about jobs will be soon be distributed around the community.

“There truly is a job for anybody,” Jim Allen, chairman of Hard Rock International, said.

Cassidy said that the nonprofit nature of the exposition will not be jeopardized by a casino operation although he did not elaborate. The organization will remain a public charity and the casino venture will enhance the exposition’s underpinnings, he said.

Reaction from city officials was guardedly positive.

West Springfield Mayor [Gregory Neffinger](#) said he is forming a group to study the proposal. The mayor called Hard Rock officials “transparent and open” in their manner in dealing with the city.



[Eastern States Gene Cassidy Talks About the Hard Rock Casino Proposal](#)

Gene Cassidy of the Eastern States Exposition talks about the Hard Rock Casino proposal for the West Springfield grounds.

“If it happens 1,000 yards away across the river in Springfield we won’t have any control,” Neffinger said. “If it is in West Springfield we have control.”

There are two resort casino proposals just across the river in downtown Springfield – by [MGM Resorts International](#) for a project in the South End at the edge of downtown, and by [Penn National Gaming](#) for a complex at the North End of downtown – plus a longstanding proposal by the Mohegan Sun for a resort casino off Massachusetts Turnpike Exit 8 in Palmer.

Neffinger stressed that he is not supporting or opposing the project, despite speaking Friday.

“We have to answer all these questions and put it before the voters,” he said, alluding to the fact that any casino in the state must win the approval of its community’s residents at the ballot box.

Neffinger said the main traffic accommodation will be to extend Agawam Avenue from Route 5 near the power

station out to the exposition grounds.



[Bret Michaels Performs at the Hard Rock Announcement at the Eastern States Exposition](#)

Bret Michaels performs at the Eastern States Exposition at the Hard Rock Casino announcement on Friday afternoon.

Town Council President Kathleen A. Bourque and Councilor Brian J. Griffin said the presentation, which was preceded by throbbing music from a disc jockey and a performance of "Mama Don't Dance" by Michaels, was very well done.

"I think it was a great presentation. I was especially impressed with the philosophy of Hard Rock," Griffin said. "The citizens of West Springfield will have the end say. We will listen to all their voices and then we will go forward from there."

Plans call for [Hard Rock](#) to sign a ground lease with the exposition and make capital improvements to its campus, "ensuring that the

facility can enhance its business operations and its economic impact on the region," according to a press release issued by the exposition.

Hard Rock would provide support and assistance with live events and marketing during the Big E fair, which draws 1.3 million people to the region annually.

Meanwhile, Mayor Richard A. Cohen in neighboring Agawam has set a press conference on the proposal for 2:30 p.m. Monday in his office.

"I was very disappointed. No one mentioned Agawam," Agawam City Councilor George Bitzas said of the presentation.

He said the project could be a "disaster" with traffic coming to the attraction through Route 57.

"This was an economic development opportunity that had to be presented to the communities of Western Massachusetts," Cassidy said.

The exposition chief stressed what he called the "honorable" natures of Allen and Hard Rock, calling Hard Rock's partnership with the local nonprofit "a match made in heaven."



[Hard Rock International Chairman Talks About Eastern States Casino Project](#)

Jim Allen talks about the proposed casino by Hard Rock International at the Eastern States exposition.

Allen noted that Hard Rock operates destination entertainment and gaming centers at 177 locations in 58 countries.

“We understand the entertainment business,” Allen said. “There is no one who submitting an application to the state of Massachusetts who has that type of experience. ... We are not a company that just wants to put machines and activities in a block.”

Allen described Hard Rock as the “greatest family hotel chain” in the country.

“This is not just going to be just a casino,” Allen said, adding that there is the possibility of starting

a rock’n’roll school.

The Eastern States Exposition, which fronts Memorial Avenue, is home to the 17-day Big E fair as well as trade, hobby and garden shows throughout the year.

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