

OXFORD HILLS

Oxford selectmen support casino proposal

By M. Dirk Langeveld, Staff Writer

Published: Nov 06, 2009 12:00 am

OXFORD — Echoing a decision it made last year, the Board of Selectmen on Thursday unanimously voted to support a proposal that would place a resort casino in the town.

Members of Black Bear Entertainment LLC, which is gathering signatures to put the casino proposal before voters in next year's , November election, made a brief presentation to selectmen.

Peter Martin, spokesman for the group, said it is staying with Oxford for a proposed site because of the need for more jobs in the area. "They didn't have to come back to Oxford," Martin said. "Actually, if they had gone to southern Maine, dollars-and-cents-wise, it would have made more sense."

Rupert Grover, an owner of Grover Gundrilling in Norway and a member of the group, said a resort casino would make western Maine more of a tourist destination. He said several manufacturers and other businesses have closed, putting stress on workers. "Every day that we're there (at his business), we have people coming through the door looking for jobs," he said.

Jim Boldebook, founder of Creative Broadcast Concepts in Biddeford and a member of Black Bear Entertainment, said the group wanted the approval of the town before proceeding with a proposal that would put the project there. "We think it's going to be more than just jobs," Boldebook said. "We think it's going to be a tremendous economic stimulus for the entire western Maine region."

The town's Economic Development Advisory Committee has also supported the proposal and recommended that selectmen do the same. Both the committee and the selectmen, whose members have not changed since last year, supported a casino effort at last year's November election.

In that plan, Las Vegas-based Olympia Gaming took over a plan from Evergreen Mountain Associates that sought to put a \$184 million resort casino on a 40-acre parcel in Oxford. The proposal was met with strong support in Oxford County, but failed at a statewide referendum.

Black Bear Entertainment's proposal seeks to remedy some of the more controversial aspects of last year's bill, which backers promised would be fixed by the Legal and Veterans' Affairs Committee of the Maine Legislature. These included charges that the gambling age would be lowered from 21 to 18, credit could be extended to gamblers, and the president of the casino would sit on various decision-making and oversight committees.

"What we heard over and over again was, 'If you had written that differently, it would have passed,'" Martin said.

Black Bear Entertainment's proposal states that the gambling age will remain the same, credit will not be extended to gamblers, the president will not be allowed to sit on such committees, the number of slot machines at the casino would be limited to 1,500, and a 10-year moratorium on new casino construction proposed in last year's bill would be replaced with a current law providing a 100-mile buffer between casinos in the state.

The group has estimated that the resort casino would create about 1,000 jobs by the third year and would result in \$50 million in revenue for the state. Martin said Thursday that the jobs would have an average annual salary of \$35,000, plus benefits. Opponents of casino expansion in Maine have argued that casinos will lead to an increase in crime and gambling addiction, will not bring in significant numbers of out-of-state tourists and will increase public infrastructure costs.

The Black Bear Entertainment proposal also calls for the casino to be taxed at a 46 percent rate, with 1 percent of revenue equal to about \$1 million. Of that revenue, 25 percent would go toward funding for the state's K-12 schools; 4 percent each toward the University of Maine Scholarship Fund and the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes; 3 percent each to the Maine Community College System scholarship programs and Maine Gambling Control Board; 2 percent to the town of Oxford; 1 percent to Oxford County; and 1 percent each to the state's dairy stabilization, agricultural fair support, sire stakes and harness racing purse funds.