

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Poll finds opposition to a 2nd casino in Philadelphia

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With the deadline to apply for a license to operate Philadelphia's second casino just a month away, results of the latest Inquirer Pennsylvania Poll show that 45 percent of likely voters in the city and the four surrounding Pennsylvania counties oppose building another gaming hall, vs. 33 percent who support doing so.

Forty-seven percent of respondents from the Philadelphia area said they agreed with opponents' contention that a second casino would bring crime and traffic while changing the dynamics of the neighborhood in which it is built for the worse, according to the poll, conducted Oct. 4-8 by a bipartisan team that interviewed 600 likely voters. The margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Just 39 percent of local respondents said they supported a second city casino because it would mean new jobs and much-needed revenue.

Prospects for a second casino dimmed in late 2010, when the state Gaming Control Board stripped investors behind a proposed Foxwoods Casino in South Philadelphia of their license after years of delays in getting it built. But efforts in Harrisburg to put the license out to bid statewide failed, and in July the gaming board ruled it would remain here.

The city's only casino to date, SugarHouse, opened in September 2010 on the Delaware River waterfront.

"I support no casinos, but since we have one, we might as well have competition," David Walker, 44, of East Falls, an IT specialist for the Tredyffrin/Easttown School District in Chester County, told pollsters. "I don't think one company should have a monopoly on the market."

That second casino is unlikely to open until 2014 at the earliest, after the vetting and application process is completed by the gaming board. Spokesman Doug Harbach said the board could not disclose applicants until after the Nov. 15 deadline.

But at least one is known: Developer Bart Blatstein announced in early April that he wants to convert the former Inquirer/Daily News building on North Broad Street into a \$500 million casino-hotel complex.

Paul Boni, a Philadelphia lawyer and board member of the national group Stop Predatory Gambling, which vigorously fought the opening of casinos in the city, said the poll responses were not surprising.

'Preying'

"With casinos now so pervasive, Pennsylvanians are experiencing firsthand the damage of this government program: state-sponsored gambling houses preying on human weaknesses," Boni said. "People realize these aren't the entertainment and tourist destinations the politicians described."

Statewide, however, a majority of those polled, 52 percent, said Pennsylvania was better off with casinos than without them, and most said they were more concerned with the jobs and revenue that casinos bring than with negative social consequences such as hurting families and increasing gambling addiction.

The state's 11 casinos - Valley Forge Casino Resort was the latest to open in March - employ 16,400 and generated more than \$3 billion in gross gambling revenue last year, according to the Gaming Control Board.

Gross slots revenue is taxed at 55 percent and table games revenue at 14 percent, with proceeds going primarily toward property-tax relief, as well as the state's horse-racing industry, economic-development projects, and the host municipalities.

(The Pennsylvania poll responses almost mirror those across the Delaware: The latest Inquirer New Jersey Poll, in which 604 likely voters were interviewed Oct. 4-8, found that 64 percent said the Garden State - where Atlantic City has had exclusive rights to casino gambling since 1976 - was better off with casinos than without them.)

Job gains

At a hotel ribbon-cutting in Center City on Thursday, Mayor Nutter said: "We've been studying the reports that show a second casino will generate significant construction jobs and permanent ones once the casino actually opens."

But some gaming analysts question whether the Philadelphia market - which already is home to Parx in Bensalem and Harrah's Philadelphia in Chester in addition to SugarHouse and Valley Forge - can absorb another casino.

The demand, they say, is not there.

"It's hard to imagine that a second Philadelphia casino will grow the market substantially," said John Kempf, of RBC Capital Markets L.L.C. "Already, we are seeing growth at the existing casinos decelerate, with some, like Chester, losing some share. Right now, I don't think the market is ready for new supply."

Statewide, 45 percent of those polled said they were more concerned that passing up new casinos would cost the state much-needed revenue and jobs, vs. 41 percent who were more concerned that additional casinos would hurt families and increase gambling addiction.

"This isn't simply a matter of not in my backyard," Boni said. "Pennsylvanians are saying they've had enough of casinos, anywhere. When Mayor Nutter sings the praises of a second casino here in Philadelphia, who exactly is he representing?"

City officials said it's all about the jobs - more than 1,000 new ones once a second gambling hall opens.

Said Alan Greenberger, deputy mayor for economic development: "The majority of those jobs will be filled by a diverse cross-section of Philadelphians."

About the Polls

The Inquirer Pennsylvania and New Jersey Poll results are based on telephone interviews conducted Oct. 4 through Oct. 8 with 600 likely presidential-election voters in Pennsylvania and 604 in New Jersey.

Polls were conducted by a bipartisan team of national political pollsters - Jeffrey Plaut, founding partner of the Democratic firm Global Strategy Group, and Adam Geller, chief executive of the Republican firm National Research.

The estimated margin of error for statewide results is plus or minus 4 percentage points; for results for the five-county area - Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties - the margin is plus or minus 6.9 percentage points. The Pennsylvania Poll is sponsored by Susquehanna Bank.

Results for the seven-county South Jersey area - Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester and Salem counties - have a margin of error of plus or minus 8.5 percentage points. The New Jersey Poll is sponsored by PSEG.

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