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In Florida Battle, Casino Cash vs. Disney Image

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The battle for Florida's tourism soul has been joined.

On one side is the Florida Chamber of Commerce and the powerful Walt Disney Company, which strenuously advances the family-friendly vacation-postcard image through its theme parks.

On the other side are billions of dollars in resort-casino investment, beckoning to traditionally gambling-averse lawmakers at a time when the state's economy is in the doldrums and unemployment remains stubbornly high.

The focus of the battle is a bill that, if adopted, would drastically change the profile of the gambling industry here by allowing three lavish \$2 billion resort casinos to open in South Florida — Dade and Broward Counties.

And with the promise of tens of thousands of sorely needed jobs and many millions of dollars in tax revenue, Florida politicians are recalibrating their positions.

Showing its muscle, the [Genting Corporation](#), a Malaysian company, this spring [paid \\$236 million in cash for The Miami Herald headquarters](#), which hugs Biscayne Bay, and bought up neighboring properties to amass 30 acres for one of the casino projects.

The company, which runs an enormous resort casino in Singapore, plans to invest more than \$3 billion and is already talking about fixing highways, building parking garages and partnering with nearby restaurants, hotels and the performing arts center. Its plan would create the largest casino in the country.

It was Genting's considerable investment and detailed plans that resuscitated gambling as a major legislative issue this year, with lawmakers promoting upscale casinos as an economic lifeline. The Las Vegas Sands, the Wynn and others are also vying for contention.

It is not as if legalized gambling is unknown in Florida, but the proposed destination resorts, as they are called, would be a radical departure from most of the existing gambling sites, which include casinos run by the Seminole Tribe of Florida, as well as racinos — slot machines and no-limit poker rooms at racetracks.

Gov. Rick Scott, a conservative Republican who campaigned on the promise of creating hundreds of thousands of jobs, has remained mostly neutral, saying only that he does not want Florida's economy to over-rely on gambling. Devastated by the collapse of the housing market, Florida has a 10.6 percent unemployment rate and faces \$2.6 billion in budget cuts this year.

The casino bill will be taken up in the two-month legislative session that starts in January. Despite the legions of lobbyists for the gambling industry who have swarmed Tallahassee and the state's appetite for treasure, victory for the casinos is hardly a cinch. That is because the gambling industry faces a daunting opponent: Disney, Florida's most powerful corporation.

Disney has long decried gambling as counterproductive to Florida's theme park tourism. Also in Disney's corner is the Florida Chamber of Commerce, an influential force among state Republicans, which argues that expanding gambling would mar the state's drive to court other industries. The chamber's chairman is a [Walt Disney World](#) executive. The powerful speaker of the House, Dean Cannon of Orlando, so far has stayed quiet on the project.

"Expanding casino gambling in Florida would never make sense in a good economy," said Mark A. Wilson, the president and chief executive of the Florida Chamber of Commerce. "And the only reason they are even targeting Florida is that they are hoping that desperate people will reach for desperate measures. There is never a good time to push a bad idea."

But even Jeb Bush, who vigorously fought the expansion of gambling while he was governor, says it appears casinos might find a home in the state next year, so long as it is in South Florida.

"The north will let the heathens in the south have the casinos, and they'll take the benefits," [Mr. Bush told The Las Vegas Review-Journal](#) editorial board this month.

The two lawmakers who introduced the bill argue that Florida became partners with the gambling industry years ago. The state receives hundreds of millions of dollars from the Seminole Tribe, which runs seven casinos statewide on its reservations, including the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Hollywood. The lawmakers want to end the tribe's monopoly on casinos. Florida also pockets healthy tax revenues from South Florida racinos. At the same time, the state is awash in Internet sweepstakes cafes that critics say double as low-rent, strip-mall gambling operations.

If anything, the lawmakers say, their bill would lure a wealthier, international clientele and bring a sense of coherence to Florida gambling by forcing the creation of an independent gambling commission, which would oversee gambling in the state.

"Everyone is sticking their heads in the sand," said Senator Ellyn Bogdanoff, a Fort Lauderdale Republican, who introduced the bill in the State Senate this week along with Representative Erik Fresen, a Miami Republican, who introduced it in the State House. "Florida has become the fourth-largest gaming state in the country — and we're an anti-gaming state."

"The kind of gaming that is expanding here is the kind that nobody should want," Ms. Bogdanoff added. "The point is that you create a strategic future for gaming: You reduce the bad gaming. And you increase the gaming that brings in economic development."

To play down unflattering comparisons to Las Vegas, the bill would require that casinos be tucked out of view and would also require a minimum \$2 billion investment. Broward and Dade Counties were selected because voters have already approved a referendum that permits Las Vegas-style slot machines.

Some Miami city boosters, including the head of the economic development group, and business leaders, say they fear that casinos could put local shops and restaurants out of business and mar a budding arts scene downtown.

“I want to make sure that none of these destination gaming resorts end up being a black hole that ends up sucking the life of the whole neighborhood,” said Mayor Carlos A. Giménez of Miami-Dade County. “We don’t want pawn shops and massage parlors.”

But Genting is working to allay concerns. For starters, the company says, Miami is a grown-up, cosmopolitan city, which already has its own identity, cultural backdrop and a strong tourism industry, unlike Atlantic City, Las Vegas and Biloxi, Miss.

What’s more, the resort’s convention center would allow large conventions to come to town. Lawmakers say that that is one reason Disney World, which does big business with conventioners, opposes the plan.

This worries Miami Beach officials, who so far have said they do not want casinos on their island. Miami Beach has the only convention center in the Greater Miami area but it is badly outdated and does not have an onsite hotel. One candidate in the Miami Beach mayor’s race has made bringing a new convention center and casino to Miami Beach one of his chief issues.

The local competition — the Seminoles and the racinos — is gearing up for the coming legislative brawl. If casino gambling expands, the Seminole Tribe says it will stop paying the state the \$1 billion it agreed to over five years in exchange for exclusive rights to blackjack and baccarat. No exclusivity, no money.

“Every payment stops,” said Barry Richard, the tribe’s lawyer. “The Seminoles are entitled to continue with their casinos for 20 years, and the state gets no money.”

The racinos with slot machine licenses are waging a separate battle. They pay a 35 percent tax rate to the state and, under the bill, the three casinos would pay a 10 percent rate. This would most likely put some of them out of business and shrink tax revenues.

In Tallahassee, the spoils are unmistakable.

“There’s a lot of money flowing,” said Senator Ronda Storms, a Brandon Republican.