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With casinos, theaters fear competition for big acts

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Actor and comedian Denis Leary, a Worcester native, wouldn't have had any trouble selling out a show at The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts.

But the Hanover didn't get the opportunity to host Mr. Leary. Instead of coming to Worcester, Hanover executives say, the "Rescue Me" star performed at Mohegan Sun.

Nonprofit theaters in Massachusetts already lose business to entertainment venues at Connecticut casinos Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods.

Now, as lawmakers prepare to pass a bill that would legalize casino gambling in Massachusetts, theater executives fear the three new casinos proposed for the Bay State will snag all the best acts.

"We're afraid," said Troy R. Siebels, executive director of The Hanover Theatre. "We think it could put us out of business."

The theater opened three years ago after a huge renovation effort. While it still has \$4.8 million in debt, the theater finished the last fiscal year \$200,000 in the black. It sold about 170,000 tickets last year. Local politicians tout its success.

Unlike casinos, which thrive on gamblers, theaters like the Hanover must make money on ticket sales. They sell tickets when they host popular shows. But popular musicians and comedians often end up playing at casinos, because casinos can pay them more. Casinos also set radius restrictions that ban performers from going to other nearby venues.

"It's the fact that we can't get the performer — that's the problem," said James D. O'Brien Jr., chairman of the Hanover's board of directors.

Lawmakers have been in touch with Mr. Siebels and others in the performing arts industry, and they have built protections into the casino bill. The measure requires casino entertainment venues to have fewer than 1,000 seats or more than 3,500 seats. The requirement was drafted to limit direct competition between casinos and existing theaters. The Hanover has 2,300 seats, while Symphony Hall in Springfield has 2,600 seats and Lowell Memorial Auditorium has 2,800.

But Mr. Siebels said the bill doesn't go far enough. He wants the bill to limit casino venues to fewer than 500 seats or more than 5,000.

Tina M. D'Agostino, interim president of the Springfield Performing Arts Development Corp., which operates Symphony Hall and a smaller theater, CityStage, shares Mr. Siebels' concerns.

"It's really important for us to fulfill our mission and promote economic development in the downtown," she said. "When our business is negatively affected, it really affects the restaurants, the hotels, the parking garages. We're not just in it for ourselves."

State Rep. Vincent A. Pedone, D-Worcester, has worked with theater advocates. He said the casino bill includes enough protection for local theaters.

In addition to seating limits, the bill requires casino developers to sign agreements with theaters about cross-marketing and coordination of performance schedules.

"I'm confident that through this open dialogue, the casinos can be profitable, and the theater industry will not be negatively impacted," Mr. Pedone said. "Both can co-exist."

But casino opponents argue casinos will hurt a variety of local businesses, including theaters. Kathleen Conley Norbut, a member of Citizens for a Stronger Massachusetts, said she worries casinos will take dollars away from the state's "historical and cultural gems."

The Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts in Hartford — a 50-mile drive from Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun — provides a glimpse of what could happen to theaters in Massachusetts. The Bushnell used to attract dozens of pop and rock shows every year. Now, the theater is lucky to get six.

"When the casinos came, that really put the nail in our coffin," said David Fay, the theater's president and chief executive officer. "They absolutely take all of the major pop attractions. Luckily, we have not been challenged with Broadway products."

The economic recession hit the Bushnell hard, eroding the theater's endowment and leading to a loss of corporate donors. Those factors, combined with competition from casinos, have left the theater with a deficit of more than \$1 million.

Mr. Fay believes there is no need for more performance spaces anywhere in the country. "There is an overabundance of performance spaces, and not nearly enough products to fill them all," he said.

Some developers are already making plans for casino development. Mohegan Sun wants to build a resort-style casino in Palmer. The proposal includes a performance space of up to 1,500 seats.

"It was scaled with input from the community," said Laura Wareck, a spokeswoman for Mohegan Sun.

Mohegan Sun representatives have been in touch with theater directors in Worcester and Springfield, she said.

Mr. Siebels, of the Hanover Theatre, credited lawmakers for taking steps to help local theaters. But he's not sure how much protection they can really offer.

“At the end of the day,” he said, “I don't know if it would be possible to mitigate the impact of casinos.”