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Three titans contending for Boston-area casino license

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In a region infatuated with competition, politics, and personalities, the battle for casino development rights in Greater Boston has all the elements of can't-miss public theater.

The sniping and chest-thumping is already underway, in a clash of egos and corporate power that will unfold during the next 13 months, until the state gambling commission chooses a single winner.

Hundreds of millions of dollars are at stake in the all-or-nothing contest among Suffolk Downs, led by lead investor Richard Fields; Wynn Resorts, the firm founded by Las Vegas casino magnate Steve Wynn; and Crossroads Massachusetts, the development company of David Nunes, who met last Tuesday's casino application deadline with just 10 minutes to spare. Two more casino applicants that did not declare specific sites could also potentially join the contest.

The competition has evolved exactly as the state gambling commission had hoped, attracting multiple, well-heeled rivals who have enormous incentive to try to outdo each other with more inventive and compelling projects.

Two of the projects are urban proposals in the heart of Greater Boston, which will face sharp questions about access and traffic. Suffolk Downs and partner Caesars Entertainment plan a \$1 billion gambling resort at the 78-year-old racetrack on the East Boston-Revere line. Barely five miles away, Wynn plans a \$1 billion hotel and casino project on vacant industrial land on the Mystic River in Everett.

Nunes controls 177 acres off Interstate 495 in Milford, about 35 miles from Boston, where he plans a suburban casino. Nunes has previously offered budgets for the project of \$750 million or more, but recently declined to say how much he would spend. He does not want his competitors to know.

The personalities involved are as disparate as the projects.

Fields, 67, is excitable and passionate, self-effacing — at least in interviews — and obsessed with horses, ranches, and the outdoors. He formerly worked with Donald Trump and is known as an influential behind-the-scenes mover in the casino industry.

“I have this connection I can’t explain, an emotional connection with everything having to do with agriculture and saving farms and ranches, and that has brought me to saving this racetrack,” Fields said in a Globe interview.

Wynn, who turns 71 this month, has built some of the most famous casino hotels on the Las Vegas Strip, such as Bellagio, The Mirage, and the Wynn and Encore resorts. He is a celebrity billionaire, a collector of Picasso masterpieces, prone to bragging, but revered for his development vision and skill.

“We’re going to present our credentials and on paper we’re going to show them a first-class project,” said Wynn, speaking of the competition in Massachusetts. He cannot help but add: “And probably it will cause the Suffolk people to upgrade.”

Nunes, 52, has a far lower profile, though he believes he has the winning formula. The rural setting of the casino he proposes is similar to what most Massachusetts gamblers have grown accustomed to, from trips to the casinos in Connecticut.

“People who have gone to Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods want the same experience,” said Nunes, who is gregarious and laughs easily, but has a sharp tongue. “A lot of your gamblers are women over the age of 55, single, widowed, or divorced. Do they want to park in a dark garage in Everett? I gotta be honest.”

Frank Fantini, publisher of Fantini’s Gaming and Lodging Reports, said each Boston-area proposal has strengths.

“Everybody knows if Steve Wynn’s name is on a project, it’s going to be first class,” said Fantini. “We also know he operates at the top end. He doesn’t deal with your stereotypical little old lady playing 25-cent slot machines. To me, that’s his big advantage: If you want a signature development in Boston, he’s going to provide that.”

Suffolk Downs “gives you the opportunity to put gambling where it’s always been, at a racetrack, which could have a lot of appeal for those who are a little skittish about having a gambling operation next door,” said Fantini. “Caesars will bring cross marketing and the development of casino marketing as a consumer science. They have a lot of strength that way.”

Nunes lacks his own vast corporate empire. He is a dealmaker, skilled at assembling partnerships. He has recruited the respected casino management firm Warner Gaming to the Milford project, and recently announced the financial backing of Robert Potamkin, an auto-dealership magnate who holds a stake in SugarHouse Casino in Philadelphia. Potamkin, who declined to be interviewed, and Nunes previously served together on the board of an independent school in Colorado.

“David Nunes — that’s interesting,” said Richard McGowan, a Boston College professor and casino expert. “From the state’s point-of-view, [Milford] might be a place that could use some economic development more than the other two.”

Four other developers are vying for the western Massachusetts casino license, while two others are vying for the state’s sole slot parlor license. Bidding for the third casino license, in southeastern Massachusetts, has been placed on hold to give the Mashpee Wampanoag time to pursue a tribal casino in Taunton under federal law.

In search of every possible edge, the developers in Greater Boston are playing up their claims of local roots.

Nunes, who lives now near Aspen, Colo., is originally from Bolton and graduated in 1978 from Nashoba High School. The developer says he has been trying to build a casino in Massachusetts since at least 1996, when he was working with the Wampanoag Tribe of Aquinnah. He has pursued a Milford casino since 2008, three years before the state finally legalized Las Vegas-style gambling after many false starts.

Though Fields is from New York, Suffolk Downs is a Massachusetts icon. Super-horses Seabiscuit and Cigar raced there. A super band, The Beatles, played there. Prominent Boston businessman Joseph O’Donnell is the second-largest stakeholder in the track. And details of the Suffolk Downs casino proposal, presented publicly last June, came from innumerable meetings during six years with neighbors in East Boston and Revere, said Fields, who managed to jab Wynn without mentioning him.

“You can’t just parachute into Massachusetts,” he said.

Wynn’s Everett proposal seemed to come from nowhere in November, when news that he was coming to tour the site broke two days before the visit. But Wynn promotes his return to Greater Boston as a homecoming, of sorts.

“My whole family is from Revere,” Wynn said in a Globe interview. His parents met there, and Steve Wynn would have been born in Revere if not for his father’s heart problems, which left him ineligible for the military draft. Instead, Michael Wynn took a defense job at a Connecticut weapons-maker during World War II. Steve Wynn was born in New Haven in 1942. He is nostalgic about summers at his aunt’s house near Revere Beach.

“I think back to when I was a kid playing stickball on Dana Street with a broom and a tennis ball,” he said.

In addition to local connections, the developers have at least one other thing in common: None are serious gamblers.

“I might have played a slot machine one time,” said Nunes, who is fighting two casino giants. “As you can see, I’m a different type of gambler.”

Fields, whose development portfolio includes successful Hard Rock casinos in Florida, said he has “never gambled.”

“It’s so funny—I just don’t do that,” said Fields. “It’s not for any reason other than it’s not in my psyche. I go to Vegas or any of these places and I’ll go through the projects and find them really interesting and exciting. But I’m a developer and sort of an entertainment guy, and I’ll look at this from the standpoint of how do you make sure people have a good time? But it never occurs to me to gamble. Isn’t that interesting?”

Wynn said in an interview last spring that he shoots dice with a buddy every few years, but generally did not gamble. He said last week that he recently made the first sports bets of his life, laying 9 points last weekend on the favored New England Patriots, the NFL team owned by Wynn’s friend, Robert Kraft. Wynn a year ago proposed a casino on land Kraft owned in Foxborough, but gave up because of local opposition. He had better luck with the wager, at a competitor’s sports book, when the Patriots beat Houston, 41-28.

How much did he bet? “I can’t tell you,” said Wynn. “I’m embarrassed. It will make me look wild and crazy.”