

## Town square: Kingdom come

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On the eve of Christmas Eve, the flashing light show spread across old two-story buildings on Kings Mountain's main street sends Mayor Scott Neisler into a state of holiday bliss. "It is the Color Cosmic Christmas Tree. Make sure you get that name right." It's an impressive show, but nothing like the blizzard of neon certain to appear should federal authorities approve the Catawba Indian Nation's plans for a 220,000-square-foot casino just off Interstate 85, less than five miles south of town. Nearby looms the namesake Kings Mountain, site of an important 1780 Revolutionary War battle and now home to a national park in South Carolina.

The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs is studying the 2-year-old request, which, literally, would be a game-changer for a town used to playing second fiddle to Shelby, its bigger Cleveland County neighbor. The gambling complex and related hotels, restaurants and other venues could hire more than 4,000 people and buy as much electricity from the city-owned municipal system as the rest of the town combined, Neisler says. It also could be a jackpot for the 2,800-member Catawba tribe, landowner Jim Testa and project developers led by Greenville, S.C. video-poker entrepreneur Wallace Cheves. It also might cause some indigestion for the Cherokee Nation's two western North Carolina casinos, which are more remote than this one would be.

Before the dice start flying and slot machines shake, however, casino promoters have many hurdles to overcome, including political opposition and a legal debate over whether the South Carolina-based Indian tribe can operate across the state line. Efforts for a Palmetto State site failed.

No challenge may be more daunting than countering the passion of Kings Mountain's religious community, especially anti-gambling advocate Adam Forcade. He and his wife,

Cynthia, have attended every weekly city council meeting over the last year, sharing their latest arguments during the three-minute-per-speaker public comment portion. They've organized a core group of about 150 supporters and visited Washington to lobby federal regulators. Never active in politics before, Adam Forcade felt called to fight based on his religious views and research showing that gambling doesn't benefit local economies and, in most cases, hurts. He is a board member of a Washington-based nonprofit, Stop Predatory Gambling, which lobbies against casinos nationally.

In a small town with more than 75 churches, including the Forcades' Wesleyan congregation, finding dozens of pastors to foment anti-casino opposition hasn't been hard. At least four Baptist churches sit within three miles of the proposed site, including Glory Bound Baptist just across the interstate. Citing Old Testament prophet Jeremiah's warnings to ancient Israel, Forcade says if casino decision makers "don't listen to you, the blood is on their hands." About 1,700 people, mostly from Cleveland County, "like" the group's Facebook page. "We'd never done anything like this before, and this is so far out of my comfort range. If you had known me a few years ago I'd be the least likely person to pick this up," says Cynthia, who works in the medical industry.

Such fervor has made the couple unpopular with some people in Kings Mountain, including Betty Cash Mitchell, who can match Adam Forcade Bible verse for Bible verse. Mitchell, 82, airs a weekly Sunday morning religious show on WGNC-1450, a Gastonia AM station owned by Mayor Neisler. Standing by her Chrysler Cirrus with a license plate reading "RUSaved," she recalls visiting the Cherokee casino for a prayer vigil, asking the Lord to shut it down. But Kings Mountain's casino opponents have gone too far and created too much division, she says. "If the Lord wants it to happen, there is nothing local people can do about it."

November's elections, when Neisler reclaimed the seat he held in the 1990s, showed casino opponents can get a lot done. The casino project's two most public advocates, former Mayor Rick Murphrey and Councilman Rick Moore, were ousted. "We think they were defeated largely because of this issue," Forcade says. Murphrey had been mayor since 1999.

Councilman Moore's loss might be more surprising: He is the father of North Carolina House Speaker Tim Moore, who is an attorney for Cheves' company, Skyboat Gaming. Because of that relationship, Tim Moore is recusing himself from any state oversight of the project. But state politicians, including Gov. Pat McCrory and Attorney General Roy Cooper, have voiced opposition. Pushing back are the developers' Raleigh lobbyists including Jason Deans and Scott Laster.

On the casino issue, Neisler is showing the political adeptness of a big-city mayor. He concedes he benefited from opponents' zeal to defeat Murphrey and says he won't be a key cheerleader. His campaign emphasized making city decisions in public, rather than the close-to-the-vest style that Murphrey used to advance the gambling project. "But businesswise, the casino is a no-brainer," Neisler says. "Only a small section of Cleveland County touches I-85, and there has been no reason for anyone to stop in Kings Mountain as far as retail. But this will finally put us on the map as a destination site."

That's music to the ears of Cheves, who is more confident than ever that the project will happen. While he says political support is mounting, he declines to offer any names. "This is a general election year, and candidates need to be careful. But more and more people are realizing how vital jobs are to this area." It doesn't really matter if North Carolina politicians are opposed, he adds. "We don't think there would be a legislative issue for North Carolina. It's a federal matter." Nor is Skyboat seeking state incentives, which would require more public oversight. A Bureau of Indian Affairs spokeswoman said there is no timetable for a decision.

Casino or not, Kings Mountain is poised for growth as Charlotte sprawls westward. The town's population is nearing 11,000 after adding about 2,000 people, or 20%, over the last 30 years, modest growth compared with suburbs like Huntersville or Fort Mill, S.C., Neisler says. "But we know the growth is coming and it's going to be a matter of us managing that progress." He envisions commuter train service between Charlotte and Kings Mountain's center city, reducing traffic on oft-congested I-85. A lot of people already are finding their way downtown: The 238 Cherokee Grill restaurant had a 45-

minute wait on a recent Saturday night. A new bike shop, Pinnacle Cycle Sport, opened in January.

Given Kings Mountain's prospects, adding low-paying casino and hotel jobs is unnecessary, even if one ignores the strife caused by gambling addiction, Forcade says. For a decade, he's lived halfway between Bessemer City and Kings Mountain, commuting to Charlotte to work for a concrete company, overseeing construction of apartments. Though his mailing address is Kings Mountain, some critics still call him an outsider.

"They are trying to ram something through that has no real value to our community," he says. "We've felt like pariahs for two years now, but it's been the right thing to do."