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R.I. town divided despite casino OK

Tiverton only narrowly approved the plan, and a newly elected council includes project skeptics.

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BY MATT O'BRIEN ASSOCIATED PRESS

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — A plan to build New England's newest casino near the Massachusetts-Rhode Island border is moving forward after narrowly winning approval from town voters in Tiverton, Rhode Island.

But some remain wary of the project, noting declining casino revenues in Connecticut and Massachusetts.

"The town is deeply divided over this," said Tiverton Town Administrator Matthew Wojcik. "It makes all of us who are appointed officials for the town traverse the roadway here with some caution. We want to make sure we're accommodating the views of everyone."

Voters on Nov. 8 approved statewide and town ballot questions to allow Lincoln, Rhode Island-based casino operator Twin River Management Group to transfer its license for the aging Newport Grand slots parlor to a new Tiverton casino that will be built about 400 feet from the border with Fall River, Massachusetts. About \$3 million was spent to persuade voters to support the measure. Church leaders who warned of a rise in gambling addiction never formed a formal opposition group.

The measure easily won statewide approval, but it passed by just 368 votes in Tiverton, which has a population of about 16,000.

The project for a new casino and adjacent hotel still needs approval from town planning authorities before it can be built on marshy land off Route 24. And a new

Tiverton Town Council scheduled to be sworn in this week includes some casino skeptics.

Twin River Chairman John Taylor said after Election Day that he plans to move quickly, while being mindful of local concerns about the environment, public safety and the need for traffic improvements. The town is promised \$3 million a year from casino proceeds, and if there is a shortfall, the state will make up the difference. The state also is counting on its share of proceeds from table games and video machines far exceeding what it took in from the Newport casino. Gambling is Rhode Island's third-largest revenue source.

But a former congressman from Connecticut who went to Tiverton before the election to speak out against the casino proposal said Rhode Island should look to its neighbors before it becomes too dependent on an industry with a business model of "preying on addictive gamblers."

"The fact is there is no evidence that casino expansion in any way, on a longer-term basis, helps a local economy," said former Republican U.S. Rep. Bob Steele. "On the way up everybody cheers, 'Look at all this money!' And then on the way down the economics begin to fall apart. It's a bad recipe for building a state's economy and society."