

Baltimore Gets Closer to Having a Slots Facility

Donna Marie Owens, *WYPR*, June, 9, 2009

The Baltimore City Council last night approved legislation that moves the city one step closer to a slots facility. WYPR's Donna Marie Owens reports.

Last night's City Council vote passed zoning legislation clearing the way for a future slots parlor in South Baltimore.

City Council Vice-President Ed Reisinger represents the district where the casino would be located on city-owned land, south of M & T Bank Stadium.

"They're demolishing right now, as we speak. They're down there on Warner Street, Russell Street, doing demolition."

Last year, after years of contentious debate, Maryland voters approved a statewide slots referendum.

City Councilman Robert Curran said the new zoning amendment gives Baltimore a jump on other jurisdictions that are also planning slots facilities.

"Obviously I would hope that since the referendum was passed last year, and the five locations in Maryland, I was hoping that Baltimore City would be one of the first, if not the first. And, hopefully, we will be the first up and running. I know they expanded from 500 to 3,700, I believe, slot machines. But if we get to be first and have that amount of slot machines, then folks get used to coming to Baltimore to play the slots."

There's no firm timetable yet for the arrival of slots in Baltimore, though some city officials said it could happen as early as next year.

Scott Peterson, a spokesman for Mayor Sheila Dixon, who attended last night's meeting, said the administration is behind the plans.

"The Mayor and the administration are welcoming video lottery terminals in Baltimore. This will help us lower the property taxes, assist in some money, funding for schools, as well as provide jobs. Good jobs for the residents of Baltimore."

City Council President, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, is also a string slots supporter. She said Marylanders are already traveling to neighboring states like Delaware to gamble, and those dollars could be filling local coffers. The council president added that slots are projected to generate an estimated 25 million dollars annually in new city revenue, and bring other benefits.

"We're looking at by year five, almost \$26 million dollars. That will provide about eight cents off the property tax rate. We're looking at \$44 million to go to the schools. Looking

at 18-hundred jobs in construction, alone. Many hundred [of] jobs, long term, with the average salary of \$41,000. And I know that there are people in Baltimore that would love to have a \$41,000 a year job."

But not everyone's convinced. Three council-members -- Belinda Conaway, Bernard 'Jack' Young and Mary Pat Clarke -- voted against the legislation. Here's Councilwoman Clarke.

"I'm concerned that this whole business that says we're going to get extra money for schools, extra money to reduce taxes I don't think so. 00: 22 What I see is that what happens with money like this is that new expenses come our way. Perhaps the state says 'Oh, why don't you pick up teacher pensions here in the local sub-divisions. And oh, by the way you can use your new slots money.' I don't know. But I know that that's kinda generally how it works. So the rewards that we're hoping for, will probably not be what we were promised."

Councilwoman Conaway cited concerns about slots bringing gambling addictions, plus more drugs and crime to a city already grappling with urban social ills. City officials said the state has built funding into the slots measures for programs, like Gamblers Anonymous.

Meanwhile, Councilman Bill Cole said that debating such issues is basically futile at this point: slots are coming.

"I mean the voters made the decision with the referendum. And whether you supported it or didn't you have to respect that. And I think this council did just that today."