

Slots stance expands Westminster's resistance to development

Evidently being NIMBY, or “Not In My Back Yard,” was so last year. Some Westminster town officials have opted to reach for new heights, creating the alphabet soup jumble of NIMNNSCBY — or “Not In My Neighbor’s-Not-So-Close-Back Yard” — after jumping into the fray in seeking to have a say on the recently proposed slots parlor slated for Jungle Road in Leominster.

Before anyone can envision such a facility opening its doors, though, the biggest hurdle to it ever being built is a certain limitation in the gaming bill signed 21 months ago by Gov. Deval Patrick. While three casinos can be built in the state, only one slots parlor will be permitted within the Bay State’s borders. Even as one prospective slots parlor competitor, Tewksbury, took itself off the board last week when that town’s voters rejected a formal proposal, Leominster currently is among three communities competing for the sole license — the others being Millbury and Raynham.

Of the three, it would seem Raynham stands as the favorite, as its residents were the first to approve the mandatory host agreement — by an overwhelming margin, 1,822-290 — a couple weeks ago. For that community, which operated a dog racing

facility from 1942 to 2010 until a petition drive successfully outlawed such racing throughout the state, much of the necessary infrastructure exists for a slots facility to open its doors in about a year.

ON FURTHER REVIEW



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While the prospects of a Leominster slots parlor are hardly a lock, much of Monday night’s Westminster Board of Selectmen meeting was spent by members wanting to spell out their intense concern over such a facility opening in a neighboring community. On the face of it, such concern would make sense when recalling how residents of Wrentham stood strongly against a preliminary proposal last year by casino magnate Steve Wynn to build a casino in Foxboro. That facility would have been right on the Foxboro-Wrentham border, whereby Foxboro would have gotten virtually all of the new tax revenue,

leaving Wrentham to count up a few scraps to go with all the headaches associated with traffic and other issues that relate to being so close to such a site.

But to make any sort of comparison between Wrentham and Westminster would be a massive stretch. For starters, the Foxboro plan was to build a destination casino, which typically enjoys a greater number of visitors compared to most slot parlors. And while Wrentham would be staring at the casino across the town line, the location of the potential Leominster slots parlor would actually be closest to Lancaster and Shirley, off Interstate 190. So in figuring which cities and towns should be classified as a “surrounding community” to the Leominster site, it would clearly be those two towns — each about a mile or two from the potential Jungle Road site.

Westminster, by contrast, while sharing a border with Leominster on Route 2, has more than 10 miles of distance between that section of the border and the proposed slot parlor.

Not exactly what should be thought of as enough to tab Westminster a “surrounding community” for this project. To put the distance into context, after the final seconds tick off the clock at Gillette Stadium at the end of a New England Patriots game and

more than 70,000 fans stream for the exits, causing immediate traffic jams on Route 1 and I-95 in the vicinity of the stadium, that impact has become largely nonexistent once one travels 10 miles from the stadium. Upon acknowledging that no slot parlor would ever replicate such a traffic scenario, it’s hard to quantify any envisioned regular traffic problems actually impacting a community as far away as Westminster.

In knowing that The Cordish Cos., the entity behind the proposed \$200 million, 125,000-square foot facility in Leominster, decides which communities can be deemed a “surrounding community” — after which those communities can submit an environmental notification form to spell out any concerns about traffic and environmental issues — it’s hard to picture the company extending that definition to include communities not directly affected, and especially to those that have so publicly laid out significant resistance. Making it an even tougher sell to convince The Cordish Cos. to classify Westminster as a “surrounding community,” was in Selectman Chairman Wayne Walker going so far as to declare that “We do intend to submit comments in the subsequent phases of any studies regarding the proposed facility,”

which could be viewed as the town planning to be heard on the project, regardless of what the project’s backer decides.

After the town stood so strongly against the commuter rail lay-over station, only to see that project’s breaking of the ground earlier this month, one would think a different approach would be in order. But in seemingly taking the lead from selectmen Monday night, the Planning Board during its meeting had the issue as an agenda item last night.

At least from what was said Monday night, I wholeheartedly agree with Selectman John Fairbanks’ comment that “I don’t see much benefit for Westminster.” That would require the facility to actually be built in Westminster — a seemingly impossible task based on the town’s recent history when dealing with any significant development.

If by chance Leominster ends up with the winning application, while some traffic would travel on Route 2 east through Westminster, as noted by some selectmen Monday night, it would be just one of three primary routes, with the other two — Interstate 190 for drivers from the south and Route 2 west bringing drivers east of Leominster — not impacting Westminster directly.

With Westminster a good dis-

tance from the proposed slots parlor, it would be hard to see that the town be given a seat at the table with the Gaming Commission, as that would then open the door to any community wanting to be heard on a proposed gaming site, even if they aren’t in the vicinity of it.

That would only overwhelm the commission, bogging it down to where Rhode Island and Connecticut could continue to enjoy millions of Massachusetts residents’ gambling dollars likely into the next decade.

With a history of staunch resistance toward building projects in town, paired with the board’s latest position, this would only seem to further bury the Economic Development Committee’s recent goal of seeking to reverse the problematic perception of Westminster as being anti-big business.

At this rate, that committee might forever be left to play the role of Sisyphus, condemned by certain town officials to the end of time to try to roll a rock (representing that the town is not anti-big business) to the top of a mountain — only for Sisyphus to never reach the summit.

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