



After Lancaster city casino plan failed a decade ago, talks could revive again with state budget option



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer Jul 26, 2017



Gamblers play table games at Hollywood Casino in Grantville in this file photo.

As lawmakers put the finishing touches on the state budget, one possible solution could open the door for something that Lancaster and other places haven't had the option of getting in a decade — a casino.

State officials are setting their sights on gambling expansion in an effort to fill a \$2 billion budget deficit.

One of several proposals under consideration in recent weeks would allow for 10 new “satellite casinos.” With up to 700 slot machines and 100 table games, they would be smaller than the existing dozen that were established after gambling became legal here in 2004. None of the new facilities would

be allowed within 25 miles of current ones.

The idea is still far from reality. But proponents say satellite casinos would provide millions in licensing fees and taxes for state and local governments.

Highlights of Pennsylvania's gambling expansion negotiations

And Lancaster city — at about 37 miles away from the closest casino in Grantville — could be looked at for the first time since a failed bid in 2006 to [put a casino in the former Bulova building](#).

Michael Soll, whose consulting company has [PA_CASINOS_U26](#) analyzed gambling expansion options for Pennsylvania in recent years, said he wasn't sure whether Lancaster was ever seriously considered to be an optimal location for a casino — but it certainly hasn't been ignored.

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"I can't imagine (Lancaster has) always been off the radar," Soll said, citing its important location for travelers in the state.

Soll's New Orleans-based Innovation Group released a report in 2011 that noted the top-11 areas in Pennsylvania where revenue could be produced for the state.

Lancaster wasn't on the list, which put southern York at the top and Reading second.

A casino in those areas, the report said at the time, would bring \$154 million per year from York and \$124.75 million from Reading.

A casino in Lancaster could also potentially add millions to the city and county budgets. Two existing casinos that could have similar specifications to satellite casinos pulled in \$3.7 million and \$1.3 million for their local governments in 2015-16, according to data from the Gaming Control Board.

Local opposition

If it comes up for a vote, it appears there will be little stomach for new casino licenses among Republican lawmakers representing Lancaster County.

For years, they have voiced opposition to any new gambling ideas —from authorizing [online games](#) to legalizing [video gaming terminals in bars and restaurants](#). Those options are also being considered during the current budget stalemate.

“I personally am not a supporter of gambling. I think that can be problematic in itself, but the caucus as a whole is supportive of it,” Rep. Keith Greiner, R-Upper Leacock, said about his fellow House Republicans.

State Sen. Ryan Aument, of Landisville, said, “It’s hard for me to see any expansion of gambling I could support.”

That prevailing view among local Republicans is not new.

In 2006, Republican legislators from the county gathered 15,000 signatures and organized rallies to oppose a **\$150 million casino** with up to 5,000 slots proposed for the former Bulova building on North Queen Street. The application, submitted by two local attorneys, was ultimately invalidated by the Gaming Control Board because it did not include a signed bond guaranteeing the \$50 million licensing fee.

“People were vehemently opposed to it and others thought it was an interesting idea, and everything in between,” Lisa Riggs, president of the Economic Development Company of Lancaster County, recalled of that proposal.

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Riggs said she has not heard of anyone interested in bringing a casino to Lancaster County in recent years. She said any potential developers, however, would be advised to “reach out and talk to a whole host of community leaders” before making plans.

“Certainly we could help them understand site requirements and site needs,” she said. “But well before that happens, they need to understand the local marketplace.”

Expanding the ‘protective’ zone

Other opposition to the “satellite casino” proposal is coming from existing casinos.

Penn National Gaming, operator of the Hollywood Casino in Grantville, is opposed to the plan because of its “severe threat” to the central Pennsylvania facility and its more-than 1,050 employees, spokesman Eric Schippers wrote in an email.

State lawmakers unveil proposal to legalize 40,000 video gambling machines; Could make \$400M for Pa.

Schippers argues more than two-thirds of the casino’s customers come from locations beyond 25-miles, the proposed “protective” zone to avoid cannibalization of established casinos.

He said Penn National is seeking a 50-mile radius, which, if enacted, would put Lancaster city within the zone and prohibit any casinos here.

Senators will return to Harrisburg today to continue budget discussions.



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