

THE SUN

Arundel voters approve slots parlor Cordish will build casino at Arundel Mills, to open in 2012

Excerpted

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Anne Arundel County voters overwhelmingly approved a proposed slots parlor at Arundel Mills mall Tuesday, clearing the way for the Baltimore-based Cordish Cos. to construct what will be the state's most lucrative casino following a contentious multi-million dollar battle.

With all precincts counted, the pro-slots side won with 56 percent of the votes, versus the anti-slots' 44 percent, according to Joe Torre, director of the Anne Arundel County Board of Elections.

Proclaiming the victory "massive," David Cordish, the billionaire developer and chairman of the Cordish Cos., said he planned to immediately push forward with construction of the casino adjacent to Arundel Mills, with a planned opened date sometime in the spring or summer of 2012. Cordish said he will also seek approval for a temporary slots facility on the mall grounds by early next year.

"It's a win for the state, it's a win for the county," said Cordish. "At the end of the day, voters realized it's a lot of jobs and a lot of revenue. They got the truth and they got it right." "Question A" asked Anne Arundel county voters to determine whether a zoning decision that allows the Cordish Cos. to build a gambling and entertainment complex should stand. The high-stakes battle over slots, in which supporters and opponents together spent at least \$6 million in an effort to sway a divided electorate, garnered statewide attention because of its potential to funnel hundreds of millions in annual revenue into the state and county coffers.

The battle pitted two powerful and monied interests against each other: The Cordish Cos. and its plans to build a 4,750-machine slots parlor, and the Maryland Jockey Club, which financed the anti-slots group No Slots at the Mall in hopes of steering gambling to its Laurel race track.

Tom Chuckas, president of the Jockey Club, expressed disappointment last night in an interview before final numbers were available.

"Obviously we're disappointed," said Chuckas. "I still believe that Laurel is the best site for slots."

"If the citizens feel this way and vote [for slots at the mall], obviously we'll respect that," he added. "Overall, it does not bode well for racing in any way or fashion."

David Jones, chairman of the anti-slots group, remained upbeat last night in the face of discouraging early returns.

"Win, lose or draw, I would not change a thing I've been through advocating for this community," said Jones.

Both campaigns fought aggressively: Cordish won the support of unions representing teachers, police and firefighters, the local Chamber of Commerce and a coalition of local business owners with the message that the casino would bring 4,000 jobs and millions in revenue for education funding.

The anti-slots side ran exhaustive TV advertising, hammering the message that slots at the mall would cause traffic and crime problems, and arguing that the best venue for slots is at the track.

The dispute grew heated. Cordish asked the Maryland Lottery Commission to levy a "substantial fine" against the owners of the Jockey Club, who also own a casino in Cecil County, alleging that state law prohibits a licensee from interfering in another licensee's casino. The state attorney general weighed in, saying the Jockey Club and its business partner, Penn National Gaming, Inc., were within their First Amendment rights in financing the campaign against slots at Arundel Mills.

Just last week, the anti-slots group wrote a letter to the attorney general asking for an investigation into charges that Cordish was illegally interfering in the election process by promising local businesses the chance to invest in the casino. Cordish dismissed the allegations, calling them desperate.

Chuckas had vowed that horse racing would be destroyed if the referendum passed — that live racing at Laurel Park would end, Pimlico Race Course would operate just 40 days a year and a training center in Prince George's County would close. Cordish fired back that he would buy the tracks if they stopped operating. The Jockey Club contested, saying the tracks are not for sale.

Yesterday, the county's varied viewpoints were evident at the polls.

"Arundel Mills is a huge tourist area, so why not have it?" said Darryl Stevenson, a sophomore at Bowie State University who said he was voting for Question A. "It's going to bring a huge amount of money."

Barry Segal, 59, an electronics engineer, listened as a valet worker from Laurel Park told him why he should vote against Question A.

"Every time I see one piece of literature, I lean that direction, then I see something else, and I lean the

other direction,' said Segal, who lives in Maryland City. "I go back and forth. But then I'm hearing in the last two weeks that the horse racing industry will lose 15,000 jobs, so I'm looking at this and saying ... that concerns me."

In the end, Segal said he was leaning towards voting against the measure.

Voters approved slots in Maryland in a statewide referendum two years ago, allowing 15,000 slot machines in five counties. But the slots program has been mired in turmoil. Only one casino has opened so far: Hollywood Casino Perryville, a 1,500-machine parlor in Cecil County.

The Jockey Club failed to come up with the deposit for an Arundel license, and when Cordish won the license with his proposal to build a casino at Arundel Mills, many were surprised because they thought slots were destined for the race track.

Chuckas, though, had said the Jockey Club wanted another shot and would have submitted a "first-class bid" for slots at Laurel Park if the referendum failed.

With Question A's approval, the Cordish Cos. now only need final permitting approval from the county — a procedural step considered a formality.