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Anne Arundel voters approve slots casino

Excerpted

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Anne Arundel voters approved plans for the largest casino in the state Tuesday, and Maryland's horse-racing industry, after decades of pushing legislators to allow slots machines, warned the result could decimate it.

Passing County Question A with roughly 56 percent of the vote, voters appeared willing to look past concerns about traffic and vice to allow Baltimore-based Cordish Cos. to move forward with its proposed 4,750-machine slots parlor next to the Arundel Mills shopping mall.

But where the winding saga of gaming in Maryland would settle Tuesday was never a sure bet.

Well-financed and well-organized opposition came in the form of strange bedfellows: those who object to gambling, at least in what they consider a family-friendly location, and those in the state's racetrack industry who make their living by it.

Between Cordish Cos. and the group Stop Slots at the Mall, whose primary financier was the Maryland Jockey Club, \$8 million was spent on electioneering for the measure.

Anne Arundel residents voted to approve a casino for the county two years ago, and county leaders approved a zoning change to situate the slots venue next to the popular outlet mall before petitioners put the question back before the electorate.

The Jockey Club had hoped to get a second chance at housing the casino at Laurel Park, where most voters assumed the casino would go when they voted to allow slots in 2008. The racetrack's original bid was disqualified because it did not include the required \$28 million deposit.

"The citizens have spoken," said Tom Chuckas, president of the Jockey Club, who said racing at Laurel Park would cease as a result of the decision. "Immediate jobs and revenue took precedence." Cordish had offered to buy the track, but Chuckas said it was not for sale.

The impact on the racetrack, where attendance has waned for years, was enough to convince many voters at Brock Bridge Elementary School, a polling place near Laurel Park, to oppose the referendum, even though they weren't necessarily anti-slots.

"We thought that the casino would be at Laurel," said Dan Jeffers, a retired police officer, before he and his wife voted against the referendum. "We have friends that work over there."

David Cordish, the developer's president, who had the backing of the county's teachers', police and firefighters' unions, spent the day traveling across the region trying to drum up support with handshakes and a sign, which read "Jobs & revenue, for Anne Arundel County; Vote for Question A."

The unions, many of whose members stood outside of polling places, supported the casino because of the badly needed revenue it would supply, said O'Brien Atkinson, a police corporal and president of the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge #70, who spent the day talking to voters outside of Crofton Woods Elementary.

According to projections by state analysts, the casino could generate up to \$500 million annually, \$400 million of which would go to the state, which Cordish contends could slash the state's projected budget deficit.