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Slot-machine plan going to voters

No opponents spoke against the Gadsden County referendum

By Paul Flemming

Florida Capital Bureau

QUINCY — Gadsden County voters will have the chance to vote in January on whether to allow slot machines at Creek Entertainment Gretna, whose developers say approval of the plan would usher in additional development and employ hundreds more people in the rural county.

An overflow crowd at the Gadsden County Commission chambers listened to the speakers Tuesday night and witnessed the unanimous vote in favor of the referendum. If approved, construction would begin on a complex that promoters say would result in more than \$1 billion in wagers and \$100 million in revenues for owners, as well as millions in tax receipts for local

and state government.

No opponents spoke against the referendum, or the slot-machine plan, before the commission voted after an hour and 10 minutes of public and commission discussion.

“Come out and vote and get something you want,” said Commissioner Brenda Holt, whose District 4 includes Gretna and the site of already-approved gambling.

Each of the five commission members agreed.

“It’s as if this county is constantly being blessed,” said Commission Chairman Sherrie Taylor. “I am proud to be a Gadsdonian.”

Creek Entertainment Gretna is building a poker room and pari-mutuel barrel racing arena, where activities will begin in December. State regulators approved licenses

for pari-mutuel wagering and poker in October.

Representatives of Creek Entertainment Gretna — majority-owned by the Poarch Band of Creek Indians — propose up to 2,000 slot machines at the development on Interstate 10 at State Road 12.

Poarch Band tribal council and PCI Gaming Authority board member Keith Martin said that, if voters approve, his tribe would begin

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a five-year development plan that includes a poker room, hotels, quarter-horse racing and restaurants.

Jay Dorris, chairman of PCI Gaming Authority, described plans for four hotels, an amphitheater, restaurants and indoor equestrian center.

"Should the referendum pass, we want to start immediately opening a destination resort casino," Dorris said.

Poarch Band tribal officials and Creek Entertainment Gretna brought in the mayor and police commissioner of Atmore, Ala., and the sheriff of Escambia County, Ala., where the tribe operates Wind Creek Casino. The pair told Gadsden Commissioners what good corporate partners the tribe has been there.

A half dozen residents expressed their support of the project.

"We are 100 percent behind this project," said Clarence Jackson, Gretna's Mayor.

Henry Corry, owner of Corry Cabinet Co. in Havana, said he had hired back workers he'd been previously forced to lay off in order to complete work at the card room development.

"I really look forward to a lot of work that's left," Corry said. "It's made a lot of difference to my business and all the people that live here."

Current development on the barrel-racing arena and card room are a part of \$20 million in construction, Dorris said. If slots are approved, Dorris told commissioners the expanded development would increase county property-tax revenues by \$1.8 million in the first year and with the full development, \$5.8 million in extra prop-

erty taxes.

Before the meeting, five neon green-clad sign-wavers stood on the Jefferson Street-U.S. 90 main drag through town. Intermittent cars honked in support of the "It's Our Time For Jobs" placards the supporters wore over their "YES On The Referendum" T-shirts.

LaShonda Pride of Quincy was one of the sign-bearers. She said she was a member of St. Peter Apostolic Church and volunteered at her pastor's request. Pride said Commissioner Brenda Holt is a member of St. Peter.

Some residents kept their skepticism honed.

Grace Maloy, executive director of the Gadsden Arts Center on the square in Quincy, was busy Tuesday afternoon as artists streamed in to hang their work in preparation for Friday's opening reception for the 23rd Art in Gadsden regional exhibition

of fine art.

Maloy said she doesn't have a position on allowing slots. She owns land near the Gretna Racing development, however, and is eager to see how developers deliver on promises of a flat quarter-horse track at the site, along with facilities to house and care for the horses necessary to run traditional quarter-horse races.

That's a concern shared by the Florida Quarter Horse Racing Association. President Steve Fisch has opposed the Gretna Racing pari-mutuel license granted by the state in October, saying barrel racing does not meet definitions in state law and is merely a cheap way for developers to get a card-room license and open the door for slots. He's also said the barrel races threaten the funding that pari-mutuel quarter horse races provide to horsemen in the state.