

Casino resort fight creates a windfall for lobbyists

There is already a winner early in the battle over destination casino gambling in South Florida -- lobbyists.

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The battle over destination casino gambling in South Florida has barely begun, but already there is a big winner — lobbyists.

Whether for or against destination casino resorts, there is a Tallahassee lobbyist willing to make the case to legislators and other interested parties. C more specifically, interested parties who can shape the outcome.

The money is already flowing, and the currents of cash will almost certainly gush with greater velocity once the Legislature convenes on Jan. 10.

"It's certainly a lobbyist relief and full employment act," Miami power lobbyist Ron Book said. "It has generated a lot of lobbying activity, and I think that will be the case for the foreseeable future."

Book's clients include the Magic City Casino in Miami, which some longtime locals may still refer to as Flagler Dog Track. It blazed the trail for the state constitutional amendment permitting slot machines at pari-mutuel betting facilities in South Florida.

Besides Book, other major players in the gaming lobbying business are the law firm GrayRobinson, which represents the Mardi Gras Casino in Broward, and Capital City Consulting, whose client is Las Vegas Sands.

Genting Group, the company with the most at stake considering it has already placed a \$400 million bet on downtown Miami land, is represented by Ballard Partners, an old-line Tallahassee firm formerly known as Smith & Ballard. It paid Ballard between \$20,000 and \$29,999 in the third quarter according to the state's disclosure forms. Genting also paid between \$40,000 and \$50,000 to the Foley & Lardner law firm and something under \$10,000 to The Horne Group lobbying firm.

When it comes to the specifics of legislative strategies, most of the parties prefer to keep their cards close to their vests. "We don't like to show our playbook to the enemy," quipped Brad Swanson, vice president of the Florida Chamber of Commerce, a longtime opponent to the expansion of gambling.

But in general terms, Nick Iarossi, a partner in Capital City Consulting representing Las Vegas Sands, said, "A main mission over the last couple of years has been an education effort to lawmakers and the community on what a destination resort is." Las Vegas Sands paid Capital City Consulting \$56,000 in the third quarter.

Iarossi said he has had to address two major widespread perceptions. "One is that we are trying to turn Florida into Las Vegas," he said. "That's simply not true."

He said his client has actually supported just having one destination resort to start. The proposed enabling legislation would allow up to three.

"The other large misconception is that we'll cannibalize existing businesses," Iarossi said. He said Las Vegas Sands would build a hotel "far less than half" the size of Genting's proposed 5,200-room establishment. Furthermore, Las Vegas Sands would rely on convention business "and wouldn't build unless other restaurants and entertainment venues were in nearby areas."

In addition to Iarossi's firm, Las Vegas Sands spent between \$30,000 and \$40,000 with Floridian Partners of Tallahassee in the third quarter, according to disclosure forms filed with the state.

In athletic terms, lobbying has a reputation as a full-contact sport. And that's likely to be especially true when the opposing sides suit up over the bruising battle concerning destination casinos.

Jason Unger, of GrayRobinson's Tallahassee office, said the job requires a lot of footwork, particularly during the legislative session. Knowing how to play your hand isn't easy since the cards keep changing as bills manipulate their way through a process often likened to sausage-making.

"From the mechanical standpoint, there are meetings and briefings with the legislators," he said. "Particularly with a bill of this size, a lot of legal issues must be dealt with."

And of course, there's the issue of — well, lobbying. In this case, the Mardi Gras Casino, a 70-year-old community institution formerly known as the Hollywood Greyhound Track, is taking issue with the 35 percent tax it pays on its slot machine activities, while the enabling legislation would tax destination resorts at just a 10 percent rate.

"Our issue is fairness in the process," Unger said.

And the sheer size of the subject means that an unusually large number of stakeholders may need to ante up when it comes to lobbying. For instance, Book also represents the Miami Dolphins, which happens to own 300 construction-ready acres around Sun Life Stadium.

Dolphins owner Steve Ross isn't interested in obtaining a gambling license, Book said, but, "it's my job to protect my client's business interests and to have his property eligible should a bill pass."

As for the notoriously chaotic legislative process itself: "It is exhausting," he said.

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