



Mohegan Sun CEO pitches Palmer Casino

Megacasino operator Mohegan Sun is pitching a plan on Beacon Hill to build a giant resort casino in the southwestern Massachusetts town of Palmer - a move that brings a major commercial player to the superheated race to expand gaming in the Bay State.

Mohegan Sun CEO Mitchell Etes said his company, which runs one of the world's largest casinos, is working with Northeast Realty Associates and another group of investors to plan the Palmer facility.

Operators of the giant Connecticut casino are the latest players to eye plans for a megacasino in the Bay State as the debate over expanded gambling heats up. Several sources said representatives of the Palmer proposal met with western Massachusetts lawmakers in the State House yesterday.

The new proposal marks the entry of an operator that would develop a casino through a more typical commercial process, rather than the heavily regulated effort to build on designated tribal lands.

Under plans discussed yesterday with state lawmakers, the Mohegan tribe and Northeast Realty Associates would build a destination-resort casino on 100 acres of land near the Turnpike, according to executives familiar with the discussions. Also working on the deal is the Pennsylvania Real Estate Investment Trust.

"This development could have great economic impacts in that area," Etes said last night. "And when you add Mohegan Sun's experience - this would be a good team to develop a successful activity out there."

The move comes amid an all-out scramble by a range of gambling players to get a foothold in Massachusetts as Gov. Deval Patrick and other political leaders consider legalizing casino-style gambling.

State Treasurer Tim Cahill has proposed auctioning licenses to commercial bidders such as Mohegan Sun. He has said selling licenses to the highest bidder would result in larger economic benefits for the state.

"The treasurer has proposed that market forces determine the number and location of casinos in Massachusetts, and this (proposal) shows that the process is beginning," Cahill spokeswoman Alison Mitchell said.

Etes said his firm has agreed to help plan the Palmer casino, but the size and nature of the resort are still being discussed.

As it looks for allies, the Mohegan Tribe, which runs the lucrative Mohegan Sun casino in Uncasville, Conn., may try to partner with another Bay State tribe.

The Aquinnah Wampanoag tribe of Martha's Vineyard, which has been ramping up its effort to find a partner to build a casino with, has been considering a proposal from Mohegan Sun to team up, industry executives said.

Etes said he is eagerly anticipating action by the state on expanded gambling, and that specifics of the Palmer proposal will not be known until the legal prospects of casino gambling become clearer. "We cannot get ahead of the process," he said.

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