

## Dooley says no dice to \$350 mill. North St. Louis County casino

By Tim Logan

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Wednesday, May. 19 2010

The bid to put a \$350 million casino in north St. Louis County took a big blow Tuesday, when the county's top official said he thinks it's a bad idea.

After months of taking no stance on the controversial project, St. Louis County Executive Charlie A. Dooley changed his tune. In a letter, he told state gambling regulators that environmental concerns have led him to oppose the plan, which would put a casino, hotel and golf course on 377 acres in Spanish Lake just south of the Columbia Bottoms Conservation Area.

"I just don't think it's a good idea," Dooley said Tuesday. "Every time I go to North County, somebody's complaining about this casino. They don't want it."

This stance doesn't automatically kill the North County proposal, perhaps the biggest of 11 would-be casinos vying for one license in the state. But it throws up a major hurdle.

The Gaming Commission is unlikely to put a casino someplace where the local government doesn't want it, and the commission has plenty of alternatives. The cities of St. Louis, Cape Girardeau and Sugar Creek have all said they would welcome one, and developers are floating plans elsewhere.

The people behind the Spanish Lake proposal, a group called North County Development LLC, had little to say Tuesday. Brad Lakin, the Madison County trial lawyer who is a lead investor in the group, referred questions to attorney Ed Griesedieck, who did not return multiple calls seeking comment.

Environmentalists who have opposed the plan were ecstatic.

"What great news," said Kathleen Logan-Smith, executive director of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, when she heard. "It doesn't mean we're taking our marbles and going home. But it's great news."

Brian Underwood, one of the leaders of a group called the Common Sense Coalition, said he had heard rumblings in recent days that Dooley would soon announce whether he supports or opposes the project. He was glad to hear the county executive landed on his side.

"That's very good news," Underwood said. "Obviously, I think it's the right decision. But we're somewhat surprised."

County Councilman Mike O'Mara, D-Florissant, whose district includes the site, still supports the casino. "It's all about jobs," he said after Tuesday's County Council meeting. "We've got a lot of unemployed people."

A new casino could replace the 200 jobs that will disappear when the President casino closes in downtown St. Louis, he said.

The total development of the 377-acre casino site could be compatible with the confluence conservation area and its natural surroundings, O'Mara said. The councilman said for a long time he has wanted someone to build in the casino-site area a museum about the history of aviation in the St. Louis

region. It also would tell visitors "what the people of St. Louis are about," he said.

Dooley, who is up for re-election this fall, had stayed out of the fray for months, even as approval to rezone the site for a casino moved through the County Council last year. That measure drew heated opposition from environmentalists and from the then-chief executive of Pinnacle Entertainment, Dan Lee, who resigned after an outburst directed at County Council member Steve Stenger for his vote in support of the plan. (Pinnacle owns Lumière Casino in St. Louis and River City Casino in South County.) The rezoning passed, 4-2.

As recently as February, Dooley was still sidestepping, telling protesters only that he wanted a "win-win" outcome for all involved. Top aides said he would consider the casino's impact on jobs, tax revenue and the environment before making a decision.

But, unlike the city of St. Louis and other places, the county did not give the Gaming Commission a letter of interest in the new license. And with the process of awarding that license about to start, Dooley said now was the time to speak up.

"I gave it some considerable thought," he said.

This is a sharp contrast from Dooley's position on the new River City Casino in south St. Louis County, where he appeared at the grand opening in March and gave a rousing speech about job creation and the reuse of a polluted industrial site. But there are significant differences, he said.

The North County site, Dooley said, is "not environmentally friendly," and community opposition is much stronger than in Lemay. There was another factor: market saturation. The project would be the metro area's seventh casino.

"Do we need another?" Dooley said. "No, we have enough."

The project's supporters have argued a Spanish Lake casino would create more than 2,200 permanent jobs in a part of the region that needs them badly. Even Tuesday, as word was spreading of Dooley's letter, Griesedieck was pitching his plan to the Gaming Commission on economic grounds.

"This ZIP code leads the state in foreclosures," he told commissioners. "This is the type of development they need."

But it is not, according to Dooley, the type of development they seem to want.

Virginia Young and Phil Sutin of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.