

The Lodge's new owner seeks to expand charitable bingo

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BELMONT — The Lodge at Belmont has a new owner who plans to give the gaming facility a new name, expand its bingo operations and continue building it as an entertainment venue; and who, says Rick Newman, is warily watching a casino bill moving through the Legislature, that if approved, could be the death knell for charitable gaming throughout New Hampshire.

Newman, the general manager and lobbyist for The Lodge at Belmont, on Wednesday spoke about his new boss — Potts Gaming, LLC — and qualified remarks made by its principle, Craig Potts of Scottsdale, Ariz., that The Lodge at Belmont would be looking to the General Court anytime soon for legislation that would allow it to add video slot machines.

Everyone who is in the gaming industry in New Hampshire would love the opportunity to have slots and become a full-fledged destination resort casino, said Newman, but the only gaming bill before lawmakers now is House Bill 593, which, after having been deemed “ought to pass” by the House of Representatives’ Ways and Means Committee, is scheduled to come before the full House on Jan. 4.

Whatever the House and state Senate do on HB593, Newman expects Gov. John Lynch to veto it.

The bill, according to its financial note, would allow “the construction and operation of 2 video lottery facilities in the state which are at least 100 miles apart” as well as establish a permit process for table gaming and video lottery machines; distribute the proceeds “as a direct offset to the state education property tax and to the highway fund for highway and bridge construction and repair;” and require the lottery commission to regulate and license said facilities.

On the off chance that the House overrides the Lynch veto, the Legislature, in effect, will be picking who “wins” and who loses in the New Hampshire gaming industry, Newman explained, because the above “video lottery facilities” would kill off all competition.

That competition includes The Lodge at Belmont, which currently has a license from the Racing and Charitable Gaming Commission to offer poker, blackjack, craps, roulette and bingo, and will be seeking a pari-mutuel gaming license from the N.H. Lottery Commission to permit wagering on simulcast racing from tracks around the country.

The Lodge ceded the latter license when Torguson Gaming, its most recent owner, lost the former greyhound track after Potts, who held a mortgage on it, initiated foreclosure proceedings and won it at auction.

Potts told the Concord Monitor that, sensing a pro-gaming mood in the Legislature, he would aggressively pursue casino legislation.

“I think it was taken a little out of context. The question was ‘If you had a chance would you do it,’ but the reality is I do not see any proposal on the horizon regarding casinos that can pass the Legislature and get signed into law and that involved a facility in the Lakes Region so that being said, the plan is really to focus on growing the business we are in which is charity gaming and bringing back simulcasting and expand our bingo” which would go from two to seven days.

Although HB593 does not name any specific venues for the “video lottery facilities,” Newman thinks the front-runner is Rockingham Park, which if it built a casino would do to The Lodge and the many other operators of charity games what the Foxwoods casino in Connecticut did to Rockingham when it opened in 1992.

Despite being 138 miles north of Foxwoods, Rockingham saw its wagering drop by 50 percent after Foxwoods opened its doors said Newman, warning that the same would happen to charitable gaming anywhere remotely near to a casino at Rockingham.

“Who’s going to go to The Lodge at Belmont and be limited to a \$4 wager when you can go to a \$400 million facility and bet unlimited and have slots and everything else,” asked Newman who added that The Lodge and other charitable game operators are opposing HB593.

“The charitable gaming facilities all over the state would have to close and there are over 500 people working at those facilities right now,” including 44 at The Lodge, who would be out of a job if HB593 somehow became law.

“That would be like a law that says no one in the state could sell anything except beer except one bar in the whole state would be allowed to sell, beer, liquor and wine,” said Newman. While very much aware of HB593, Newman added that he and Potts Gaming will also try to build up what The Lodge has offered in the past, including events like a motocross, and, of course, charitable gaming.

Craig Potts is committed to charitable gaming for the long haul, said Newman.

“Charity gaming isn’t grandma’s bingo in the basement of the church anymore. It’s become the lifeblood of a lot of organizations that help people out in the community every day,” Newman said.