

Casino debut awaits vote

Gaming board to decide; Greektown plans party

November 2, 2000

BY TINA LAM

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Tuesday's presidential election may not be next week's only cliffhanger. Whether the Greektown Casino will open as planned Nov. 10 is not a sure thing, said Nelson Westrin, executive director of the Michigan Gaming Control Board.

The board is scheduled to vote on the casino license Nov. 8, but could decide it isn't ready and adjourn for 30 days, Westrin said Wednesday. That would give the casino time to cure problems, if there are any, found during the reinvestigation of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, Westrin said. The tribe owns 90 percent of the casino.

The board is reinvestigating allegations involving the tribe's past business dealings. Westrin said the investigation isn't complete.

The casino has planned a block party and black-tie gala for opening night, arranged an opening ceremony with Mayor Dennis Archer for about 11 p.m. and prepared for dozens of news media outlets to cover the opening.

"That's their schedule," Westrin said. "It's not our schedule."

The casino said it expects to open as planned. "Every indication we have is that we are going to open," said tribal spokesman John Hatch. "We've been working very hard with the gaming control board. We've met with them numerous times. We feel that we have satisfied their investigation."

The previous two Detroit casino openings, the MGM Grand Detroit Casino and MotorCity Casino, held no suspense at the same point in their licensing process. This is the first time the gaming board has asked for an immediate investigation of a group it already voted suitable.

Westrin said the decision on licensing is solely up to the 5-member gaming board. Under the state's gaming act, three members must vote "yes" for the casino to win its license.

In September, board member Paula Blanchard voted against the tribe's suitability to own the casino, saying tribal members had raised troubling allegations.

The board will hear about three hours of testimony on the tribe's business dealings at the licensing hearing, after touring the casino to determine its readiness to open.

"It all depends on what comes in that day, and on the board's feelings on readiness," Westrin said. "If they have any concerns that need to be articulated or reviewed, there would have to be an adjournment."

The board also will hear from downtown workers upset about losing their parking spaces to the casino, said Lynnette Aranow, one of the workers. She works in the Wayne County Register of Deeds Office a block from the casino. The casino has no on-site parking and is buying nearby lots, displacing workers and public visitors.

The licensing hearing will start at 3 p.m. but a decision on licensing may not come until about 8:30 p.m., Westrin said.

That's a half-hour after the start of a casino charity benefit. The charity event is not affected by licensing, because it's a non-gambling party, Westrin said.

Regulators are often under pressure to license a casino because of the jobs and tax revenues at stake, said William Eadington, director of the Institute for Gambling and Commercial Gaming at the University of Nevada at Reno.

"It's tough for regulators to bite the bullet. But this is the most important decision they make."

Contact **TINA LAM** at 313-223-4407 or lam@freepress.com.