

# Casino Development Eyed At Vacant East Hartford Movie Theater



Proposed Casino Development In East Hartford

A west aerial rendering of a \$138 million casino being proposed at the vacant Showcase Cinemas in East Hartford along I-84. The Hartford city skyline is in the background. The development team is pitching the proposed structure to the Mohegan and Mashantucket Pequot tribes.

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## Developers pitch a \$138 million casino for East Hartford near Rentschler Field

An East Hartford development team has a plan for a \$138 million casino at the vacant Showcase Cinemas along I-84 near Rentschler Field that it is pitching to the Mohegan and Mashantucket Pequot tribes.

The proposed casino would include 1,000 to 2,000 seats at slots or table games; two restaurants that the Mohegan tribe has franchise rights to, Smashburger and Arooga's Grille House and Sports Bar; fast-food restaurants; a German beer hall and Bavarian beer garden; two bars; a dance club; and 950 parking spaces for customers. The plan does not include retail shops.



The developers were assembled by Anthony W. Ravosa Jr. of Glastonbury, who, in the early 1990s, was a member of the Springfield City Council, where [MGM Resorts International](#) is building an \$800 million casino that is expected to draw customers away from Connecticut's Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods Resort Casino.

The MGM casino, and other new gambling venues in the Northeast, have prompted Connecticut's legislature to consider adding as many as three new casinos in an effort to defend the local market from new competitors. Any new casino would be owned and operated as a joint venture between the two Connecticut tribes.

Ravosa acknowledged that he has no commitment from the tribes. He said he took the initiative to devise the plan realizing that the tribes might not be interested.

"When you drive by that place as often as I did, I sensed that there was an opportunity. I went for it," Ravosa said.



The tribes released a joint statement Thursday saying that they held a rare collaborative meeting to discuss a memorandum of agreement for the development of new casinos, adding that they "are encouraged by the increasing number of towns that are expressing interest in developing an alternative gaming facility."

They said proposals like the one in East Hartford "show an increasing understanding from businesses and municipalities that the potential for job loss from competition over the state border is real, and protecting them will be good for the state and the region."

Coincidentally, there is another vacant Showcase Cinemas multiplex on 26.6 acres off Exit 45 of I-91 in East Windsor, which closed in 2008. Both it and the one in East Hartford are owned by National Amusements Inc. Ravosa said that his team has an option to buy the East Hartford property.

Ravosa's plan calls for renovating the vacant East Hartford multiplex, which opened in 1973 with four movie screens and was expanded over the years to 14 screens before closing in 2006. His development team includes entities that have experience working with the tribes and on other casino projects. The list includes: Vince Group Inc.; JCJ Architecture; D'Amato Builders and Advisors LLC; Milone and MacBroom Inc.; PKF Consulting USA; Updike, Kelly and Spellacy P.C.; LAZ Parking; and Colliers International.

Ravosa and building partner Michael J. D'Amato of Norwich said that their team's plan is ideal because it has local support and the cinema can be renovated in as little as nine or 10 months. They hope it will encourage economic development in the region near Rentschler Field, home to UConn football, and should appeal to the state because of its financial investment in the area.

They also argue that the site is in a good location near I-84, I-91, I-384 and Route 2 and the major population base around Hartford.

Ravosa's team hired PKF Consulting to analyze the effects of MGM Springfield on the Connecticut casino market and how a casino along I-84 in East Hartford might mitigate lost revenue. The consultants concluded that an East Hartford casino could bring in \$81.6 million in slot revenue in 2018, or \$155.5 million in 2017 if it opened before MGM Springfield, which is expected to open in fall 2017.

"We've got a plan ready to go here, what are we waiting for?" Ravosa said. "Because every day you wait, as we say, is one more day that you're dealing

without revenue and running into a potential problem because you're not going to be up and running."

### **'Let The Best Town Win'**

Top legislators said Thursday that they have not met with Ravosa or seen details of his proposal. Several legislators said they don't have a preference for where a casino would be located, saying that it is a long process.



Sen. Timothy Larson, co-chairman of the committee that oversees gambling, said he favors a casino in any of the three towns that have expressed interest — East Windsor, Windsor Locks and East Hartford. Despite being an East Hartford resident and a former mayor, he said he was not pushing for his hometown.

"Let the best town win," Larson said. "I've got to be optimistic. I've got to be cautious. And I've got to be like Switzerland. ... I see my role as putting together a bill that's generic, that allows towns to compete."

Larson said he didn't know the details of Ravosa's proposal.

"I've heard that East Hartford is interested in that site, but I don't know what his proposal is, nor have I seen it," Larson said. "Frankly, the fact that the communities are interested is critical to the process. If we have a bill and no place to go, what good is it?"

Unlike some other legislators, Larson is not pushing for a provision that calls for a referendum before a casino can be placed in a town.

"I'm indifferent on a referendum," Larson said. "My sense is this is no different than a large commercial development coming to your town. ... If Wal-Mart was coming to East Hartford, we wouldn't hold a referendum on that. We didn't hold a referendum on the [Rentschler Field] stadium.

"If a town wants to do a referendum — great. There will be some sort of public hearing on the merits. There are people who don't want this, and they should be heard, as well."

Rep. [Stephen Dargan](#), a West Haven Democrat who is the other co-chairman of the committee overseeing gambling, said that he, too, has no preference on a site. He said he doesn't think any particular town is currently leading in the race to host a casino.

Rep. David Alexander, D-Enfield, said he is currently leaning against voting for the casino expansion bill.

"I'm hesitant no matter where it is," Alexander said. "I'm hesitant about Connecticut trying to bankroll its budget on gambling. At the end of the day, I don't think we can win a full-on casino war."

"My residents are just going to go across the border to Springfield. They will travel 4 or 5 miles to go to Springfield instead of going to East Hartford. It's closer than East Hartford. If you have the option of East Hartford or Springfield, you will go with the real deal" with a full casino with all the amenities.

### **Local Permission**

The pending casino legislation requires that any proposal be supported by the elected board overseeing the town or city where a casino would be built.



"We're excited that East Hartford has a potential to sit with them and have a discussion," East Hartford Mayor Marcia Leclerc said, referring to Ravosa's proposal. "We're excited about the opportunity to grow our grand list, provide jobs for our community ... and basically to strengthen the Silver Lane corridor."

Revitalizing the Silver Lane corridor, which is directly behind the Showcase Cinema site, is included in the town's plan of conservation and development,

Leclerc said. She said she has received phone calls from residents asking the town to reach out to the casinos.

"People want development on Silver Lane," Leclerc said. "People want rehabilitation in those areas that are blighted and have been closed up and dormant for a long time. East Hartford is open for business and we're looking to draw in any potential developers that could put a new face on East Hartford and highlight our assets and complement Rentschler Field."

Leclerc said that the Showcase property would need a special permit to operate as a casino. She said the zoning was changed about two years ago when another developer was looking into creating an entertainment center there.

East Hartford Town Council Chairman Richard Kehoe said Thursday that the proposal would bring a significant investment to town, but that the council needs more information. Kehoe said it is unclear what role the town council would play, and officials won't know until the casino legislation is finalized.

"This could potentially never happen and not even get to the stage where the town would actually seriously consider it," Kehoe said. "We certainly wouldn't reject it out of hand because it has a casino component to it. The development is intriguing with the potential for a positive benefit to the town, but the devil is in the details, and we will need to see a more definitive application."