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A Casino at Coney Island? Brooklyn's Boro President Is All for It

By Erik Ortiz

Brooklyn's biggest booster envisions Coney Island as a gamblers' paradise, but constructing a glitzy gaming palace in the seaside resort won't be an easy bet, observers said.

Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, in response to Gov. Andrew Cuomo's support to legalize live casino gaming, said Coney Island "is a natural location and should be part of the mix when considering possible sites."

He doubled down Tuesday, adding that a Coney Island casino would be a shot in the arm for employment and local businesses, although his spokesman told amNewYork it's still too early for developers to put actual plans on the table.

Dick Zigun, founder of the Coney Island Circus Sideshow, said he backs Markowitz, especially after another plan that rezoned the neighborhood for new amusement attractions and housing has yet to be fully realized.

"The 40 acres they've rezoned for condominiums, let's do a do-over. Not one condominium has been built," Zigun said. "Coney Island still needs jobs."

Valerio Ferrari, president of Central Amusement International, which owns Coney Island's Luna Park and Scream Zone, added that "any attraction that can bring new visitors, jobs and economic opportunity to Coney Island merits consideration."

While the state has nine "racinos" and five Indian-operated gaming halls, legalizing Las Vegas-style casinos would require Albany lawmakers to approve measures in two consecutive sessions and success in a statewide referendum. That means the public could vote on it as early as 2013.

If that happens, observers said, the racino at Aqueduct Racetrack in Queens -- Resorts World New York -- would be a likely spot to build a full casino.

That could kill Coney Island's chances, said City Councilman Domenic Recchia (D-Coney Island), if lawmakers decide they don't want to have two gaming halls so close to one another.

Recchia, along with Assemblyman Steven Cymbrowitz (D-Sheepshead Bay), said they're open to gaming in the resort, but they're also wary of the negative impacts, such as gambling addictions and increased bankruptcy rates.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg said Tuesday that while he doesn't favor gambling, he understands why Cuomo is considering it as a way to improve state revenue.

"I just want to make sure that if there is gambling, some of those revenues do come to New York City. We need the revenues as well," Bloomberg said at an unrelated news conference.

Gaming analyst Christopher Jones, of Telsey Advisory Group, said New York would benefit from a gaming boom to the detriment of surrounding states that already having full gambling. And whether or not a Brooklyn casino is in the cards, talk to build one could continue.

"I'd be surprised if there's not a developer willing to develop in Coney Island," Jones said.