

Lottery Corp. gambles on a new casino

It will canvass North Shore and south of the Fraser to gauge interest

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Three years after Surrey city council rejected a \$100-million casino resort, the B.C. Lottery Corp. is putting its odds on another gambling facility, either on the North Shore or south of the Fraser.

BCLC said market analysis suggests there is potential for a gambling facility in either area.

The Crown corporation said it will canvass Surrey, Delta, the three North Shore municipalities and First Nations, including the Tsawwassen, Squamish and TsleilWaututh, to see if there is any interest in hosting a casino. The municipalities and First Nations have until July 15 to express an interest in allowing a casino, which would serve about 460,000 adults south of the Fraser or 150,000 on the North Shore.

Surrey has two casinos, Elements Casino (previously Fraser Downs) and Newton Bingo Country. Surrey Mayor Linda Hepner said her council would need more time, and information, before considering a bid for another casino.

In 2013, Surrey rejected a bid by Gateway Casinos and Entertainment Ltd. to shift its gambling licence from the Newton Bingo hall to a proposed \$100-million casino resort at 12th Avenue and 168th Street. The project had been considered a done deal until then-mayor Dianne Watts cast a tiebreaking vote to reject the bid following an exhaustive public hearing process.

“I had a pretty unpleasant experience a couple of years ago and I would not be anxious to duplicate it,” Hepner said, noting a report on the BCLC proposal will likely go to council in mid-June. “The process was pretty flawed last time. That’s why it’s important for me to get the sense of council on the whole thing, and I’d like to get the public’s opinion. I’d rather know earlier rather than later.”

Hepner, who had voted in favour of the Gateway casino bid, said she needs to know more details of what BCLC is proposing, noting Surrey has a policy of allowing only three destination casinos — entertainment centres similar to Richmond’s River Rock — in the city. With only two council meetings before the deadline, she doubts council will have enough time to investigate the proposal.

“I don’t even know if there’s a location where it would fit.”

The B.C. Lottery Corp. said it is making a play on the North Shore and south of the Fraser after considering revenue potential, population size, proximity to other gambling facilities and socio-economic factors. It estimates a casino south of the Fraser would generate between \$25 million to \$50 million in revenue, and bring in \$1.5 million to \$3 million for the host municipality or First Nation. The North Shore would reap slightly less, at between \$25 million and \$40 million with the host’s share of up to \$2.2 million.

“Both markets have potential,” said BCLC spokeswoman Angela Koulyras. “We’re still in the very early stages. We want to understand if there is any interest.”

Local governments in B.C. get 10 per cent of the net revenues of casinos and community gambling centres within their boundaries. The City of Richmond has used revenue from the River Rock Casino to pay for the Richmond oval and an aquatic centre and seniors' facility. The Hard Rock Casino in Coquitlam has provided funds for a library, sports centre and soccer tournament facility. New Westminster has used gambling funds for its Anvil Centre theatre-museum-gallery complex.

Other casinos in Metro include the Grand Villa Casino in Burnaby and Edgewater Casino in Vancouver.

"Over the years, municipalities have shown an interest in gaming because they seek the benefits that come with it ... job creation, greater amenities," Koulyras said. "They can use that net income toward capital projects."

Surrey Coun. Tom Gill, who was a big supporter of the Gateway casino project, said he would only back another large destination casino in a bid to leverage amenities such as five-star hotel and convention centre, which he said the city desperately needs.

"We've had great success with the Elements Casino, but I'm certainly looking at something much more grand," Gill said. "If I could leverage those opportunities, the answer would likely be yes."

Delta Mayor Lois Jackson said the latest BCLC proposal will go to council in the next few weeks, but she's not sure if her municipality has any land available to build a casino, or if the public wants it.

"Surrey tried twice and it was resoundingly trounced," she said. "We'll see what our council thinks."

The Tsawwassen First Nation would only say it is reviewing the proposal.

Koulyras said the market analysis showed the annual spending by North Shore players at gambling facilities is below the Lower Mainland average, indicating a need for more facilities.

North Vancouver City Mayor Darrell Mussatto said he would support a casino, but indicated all North Shore municipalities would have to be on board. Although some First Nations have expressed interest, he said, it's the first time in 10 years that the BCLC has pitched a casino for the North Shore.

Mussatto said he was surprised the BCLC was making another play for the North Shore but added, "I'm supportive of having a further look at it."

Calls to the Tseil-Waututh and Squamish First Nations were not returned Thursday.

North Vancouver District Mayor Richard Walton said there hasn't been much appetite for a casino in his area. But with two new members on council, he said, they will discuss the BCLC proposal.

He noted if a casino is built in the City of North Vancouver, West Vancouver or on First Nations land, it would still affect his residents, such as by increasing traffic or addiction levels.

"We've had no citizens or no organization, I recall, who have come to us in years saying we need a casino here," Walton said.

"You'd have to consult broadly if you want to put one on the North Shore. The lottery corporation is probably testing the waters really early to see if there is support or opposition to it. I think it's earlystage fishing."