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5-casino camps in lobbying blitz

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Monticello – Legislator Ron Hiatt says he rarely talks to Robert Berman – let alone share coffee with him. But that changed last week, when Hiatt got a call from the president of Empire Resorts and the would-be developer of two Indian casinos.

They met at the Blue Horizon diner, where Berman proceeded to extol the virtues of Gov. Pataki's plan for five casinos in Sullivan County.

"He wanted to chit-chat," Hiatt said.

But that's not the half of it.

Sullivan's nine lawmakers – who could make or break Pataki's plan for five casinos – are the target of intense lobbying from both sides.

The Catskill Casino Coalition – an alliance of union and business groups – started the campaign three weeks ago. It came after a large contingent of the anti-casino group, Casino-Free Sullivan County, spoke out against casinos at the regular meeting of the Legislature.

The pro-casino group has since passed out 3,000 "Room for 5" buttons and printed 10,000 glossy fliers touting thousands of new jobs. Pro-casino union workers are taking petitions in the lobby of the Government Center. A Web page, <http://roomforfive.com>, was put up and the coalition opened an office on Broadway.

Two 60-second radio ads are playing the "Room for Five" slogan 10 times a day, likening five casinos to the glory days when Grossinger's, the Concord, Brown's and The Pines were still open.

The public relations blitz will reach a fever pitch today, with pro- and anti-casino forces gathering at the Government Center before an 11 a.m. meeting between the Legislature and the governor's chief adviser on gaming issues, Greg Allen.

"There are a lot of people out there using scare tactics, saying casinos mean doom for Sullivan County; that's not the case," said Josh Sommers, whose public relations firm was hired by the coalition to handle the pro-casino campaign.

On the other side, Casino-Free Sullivan County continues to e-mail and telephone lawmakers.

"Our campaign isn't about money; it's about corruption," said Rosa Lee, who co-chairs Casino-Free Sullivan County.

"We don't have businesses backing us," said Sonja Hedlund, who plans to show up in her van today and pass out 1,000 "No Casino" lawn signs and 3,000 bumper stickers.

Legislature Chairman Chris Cunningham, who opposes five casinos, said the intense campaign hasn't influenced him.

"One of the developers said, 'It's my New Year's resolution to change your mind,' but so far I haven't," Cunningham said.

Other legislators also deny the campaign has any effect on their views.

"If anything, it's making my hair stand up," said Legislator Jodi Goodman, who represents the Liberty area. "I can't rely on big developers or the anti. I have to do my own research."

But lawmakers seem to have warmed to the governor's plan since Dec. 9, when all nine of them said they had serious reservations about bringing more than three casinos to Sullivan. Now five of the nine legislators say they're undecided and the other four are split.

The lobbying has extended to the town level, with large groups of union workers showing up at town meetings this week to urge the boards to pass resolutions in support of Pataki's plan.

Fallsburg, Liberty, Thompson and Monticello passed almost identical resolutions in support of Pataki's plan. Mamakating tabled a resolution, and the western Town of Delaware unanimously opposes the move.

Hiatt said he's listening to both sides. His breakfast meeting with Berman wasn't his last.

"I've got eight calls from Josh Sommers," Hiatt said. "Now I have to go have lunch with him."

Sullivan County legislators on Dec. 9, after Gov. Pataki announced his five casino plan:

Leni Binder: "There is not a person at this table who doesn't have a level of discomfort with the number that was presented and the manner."

Greg Goldstein: "Personally, I feel it's overkill to have five. I don't know if five could exist or survive in the county ... It's a tough thing to swallow."

Sam Wohl: "I'm not in favor of five, but if the governor says that's what it's going to be, five or zero, that's what I'm with."

Jonathan Rouis: "Everybody is comfortable with the three scenario. That's what we have been discussing for years."

Those same Sullivan County legislators this week:

Leni Binder: "I could conceivably support five casinos under the right circumstances, but I don't know yet."

Greg Goldstein: "Three is not going to make it. There are five tribes. They need five casinos."

Sam Wohl: It's a matter of semantics. If I support three, I support five. If we build three and leave space for two more, I'm not against that."

Jonathan Rouis: "I've got an open mind right now. I wouldn't want to foreclose on my options."

The Times Herald-Record polled the nine Sullivan County legislators this week to see where they stand on Gov. Pataki's plan for five casinos in the Catskills:

In Favor:

Greg Goldstein-R

Sam Wohl-D

Opposed:

Chris Cunningham (chairman)-D

Kathy LaBuda-D

Undecided:

Jonathan Rouis-D

Rodney Gaebel-R

Jodi Goodman-R

Leni Binder-R

Ron Hiatt-D

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