

The Opp News

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY

75 CENTS

Bingo on way to Florala?

City has deal in hand, all that's missing is a permit

BY DORIS WISMER
The Opp News

Florala Mayor and City Council plans to raise area fortunes via bingo parlors took another step forward Monday with the announcement of a partnership between a local non-profit and an unnamed out-of-state gaming interest.

If Sheriff Dennis Meeks will issue a bingo permit to the named non-profit – Florala Historical Society, – the enterprise could be in operation within 45 days.

Mayor Robert Williamson made an announcement of the proposed marriage of the Historical Society, an un-named Gulf Shores developer, and backed by an out-of-state gaming interest that would develop a destination bingo facility within city limits.

Those plans may have hit a snag Tuesday when the Senate Tourism and Marketing Committee voted 6-2 for the passage of an amendment that would protect casinos targeted by the governor, allow more casinos to open, tax and regulate the industry, but did not add Covington County to the 'points of destination.'

Those points include the Mobile County greyhound track; Country Crossing in Dothan; two locations in White Hall, which already has one electronic bingo hall; Victory Land in Shorter; Greenetack in Eutaw; the Jefferson County dog track; and one location each in the 4th, 5th and 6th



Florala city attorney Wesley Laird and Mayor Robert Williamson at Monday's news conference announcing go-ahead plans for Bingo operations

congressional districts in north Alabama to be chosen by a state gaming commission.

Mayor Williamson along with the mayor of Prichard and the president of the Fairfield City Council each were allowed three-minutes to present their bids for their cities to be added to the 10 casinos listed in the proposed constitutional amendment.

Although Williamson said this was a disappointment the quest for bingo in Florala would continue to go forward.

REVENUE

The revenue numbers put forth in the press release are staggering to a community racked by unemployment and a sluggish economy.

In a prepared statement read to the press Williamson said when completed "the project could return an estimated \$10 million to the county on an annual

basis, ... could employ as many as 1,500 and have a

See Bingo, Page 5A

Where will the money go?
See pg. 3A for list of non-profits that would benefit from bingo

major economic impact on Florala ... and Covington County."

The Florala council fired its first salvo in their bingo quest last month when they passed an ordinance setting standards for temporary and permanent housing of bingo facilities and setting requirements for the disbursement of proceeds. One hurdle, in the form of Sheriff Dennis Meeks, fell before the Gulf Shores developer breaks ground. Meeks is charged with issuing bingo permits but he isn't talking.

The Florala Historical Society filed a permit application last Friday.

Meeks refused to answer questions about the quest. Instead he issued the following written statement.

"In accordance with the laws of Alabama, First Special Session 1993, Act Number 93-886, Section 1, section 1, the definition of BINGO" (his emphasis) "is the following meaning: a game where numbers and symbols on a card are checked with numbers and symbols selected at random."

"A hundred years ago, 400 rail cars left Florala weekly from a thriving lumber industry. Later, Florala continued to flourish in the textile business. The lumber industry is gone now. Most of the textile jobs found their way to Mexico, then China.

"Many of our folks were forced to move away to find jobs.

"Our population has dropped from near 3,000 to less than 2,000. The number of students in our schools has been greatly diminished, resulting in the recent decision ... to close Florala Middle School.

"Our people are being hurt."

Williamson went on to describe the chain of events leading the city to this spot in "their road to financial recovery," saying the city would pursue any viable industry that generates jobs, just like it was a car manufacturer. "In this instance, that industry happens to be electronic bingo."

the Historical Society would share the estimate of \$10 million annual revenue return with.

"While it is no one's intent to offend anyone and it would be completely up to the proposed beneficiaries whether to take the money, this project could return an estimate of \$10 million to the county on an annual basis." (See sidebar for complete list of non-profits named)

IS IT LEGAL?

Two of the largest gaming operations in the state have closed their doors, thus foiling another raid attempt on their facilities, and Attorney General Troy King has sent his opinion that bingo in Covington County was limited due to the word 'card' in the legislation.

Act 93-886 allows for religious, educational, service, senior citizens, fraternal or veteran's organizations may operate bingo games for no profit.

The AG hangs his hat on the word 'card' and 'selected at random' in defining illegality in Covington County, however, Florala city attorney Wesley Laird said the state has made no determination that the

DEVELOPER

The developer has interest in 27 other states, but is not in Alabama yet, and according to Williamson had the most "detailed" plan for the proposed facility, and had done a lot of pre-planning in the area.

"Actual plans have not been submitted, but they will include a full entertainment complex including a full-service restaurant, sandwich shop, retail, entertainment venue, hotel and 2,500 electronic bingo machines."

Williamson said he felt the group chose Florala because of the close proximity of U.S. Hwy. 331, Ala. Hwy. 55 and the state line.

If everything falls into place and the facility is constructed, Williamson said the impact on the county would be immediate.

"Conservative estimates are that when fully built, this facility could employ as many as 1,500, with an average wage of up to \$13 per hour," he said. "It would not only have a major economic impact on Florala, but on Covington County and the surrounding area as well.

A card is commonly
le of paper," his
ement continued,
erefore, until the
bama Legislature
nges or amends
existing law, or the
bama Supreme Court
lers a decision in the
rnative that electronic
go machines are legal,
office will uphold the
, based on the local act
is in place at this time
Covington County."

When asked if that
ement meant he would
issue the permit, Meeks
1 the statement spoke
itself.

At Monday's press
ference Williamson was
ed about the effect of
ent closings of casinos
Shorter and Dothan and
possible consequences
moving ahead while
v. Bob Riley's illegal
nbling task force
ir was making noises
out raiding any and all
ablishments. "That's
risk we are willing to
e," he said. "The sheer
nomic impact can't be
ored,"

Williamson said Florala
er the years had gone

in Dothan and other
parts of the state, he (King)
has stated that with the right
machines, it's legal," he
said. "The machines must
meet the qualifications,
which our developer has
been very careful to make
sure the machines meet the
Supreme Court's six-point
test."

Williamson said while
he was concerned about
the possibility of the
governor's task force
coming into town and
shutting the planned casino
down, he felt the economic
return outweighed the
possibility.

"It becomes simplisti-
- it's about our economy
and the people of Florala
without jobs. Everything
else becomes secondary."

In Williamson's closing
remarks before the
committee Tuesday, he
summed up what appeared
to be the general public's
consensus at the Monday
press conference.