

Western Pennsylvania first pull at slots

Erie – Gamblers wagered USD 2.6 million in two test runs at Presque Isle Downs & Casino here before it opened Wednesday, the biggest debut of Pennsylvania's first four slot parlors.

Yet, that can't compare to what Pittsburgh's stand-alone slots parlor could do when it opens next year, state Gaming Control Board member Sanford Rivers said after the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

He expects Detroit businessman Don Barden's planned North Shore casino, west of the Carnegie Science Center, to bring in more money than any other slots parlor in the state. It's scheduled to open in March 2008.

„(Barden) has a situation where he could have one of the pre-eminent facilities, not only in the commonwealth, but anywhere outside of Las Vegas,“ Rivers said.

The Presque Isle Downs thoroughbred racing track – scheduled to open in September – was shrouded yesterday morning in a thick fog with snow flurries. But a crush of about 500 gamblers waited as long as two hours in the cold to be among the first people trying out the 2,000 slot machines on a football field-sized gambling floor in the adjacent casino.

As the first casino in Western Pennsylvania, Presque Isle should draw players from the Pittsburgh area, said Ted Arneault, CEO of MTR Gaming Group, which owns Presque Isle and Mountaineer Race Track & Gaming Resort in Chester, W.Va.

MTR officials told The Associated Press they expected up to 10,000 visitors yesterday.

„The crowds are enormous and the play is tremendous,“ said

state gambling board spokesman Doug Harbach. The state won't have official results from the first public day of wagering until today.

„It's not as plush as I thought it would be on the outside,“ said Jan Stewart, 58, a native of Greensburg, Westmoreland County.

But she didn't come for the ambience. Stewart said she couldn't wait to start playing the games and expects to make the drive from her home in nearby Cambridge Springs „as often as we have the money.“

By comparison, Pittsburgh's Majestic Star Casino can be a showplace, said Rivers, who lives in Churchill.

In a wide-ranging interview with the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, the gambling board member explained why the board gave Barden the Pittsburgh license in December.

Barden beat out two other competitors: St. Louis-based Isle of Capri Casinos, which agreed to pay USD 290 million for a new Penguins hockey arena, and Cleveland's Forest City Enterprises, which wanted to open a Harrah's Station Square Casino. Those bidders have until Monday to appeal the award.

Board members considered Isle's arena offer, but it did not fall within the strict guidelines of criteria for awarding the license, Rivers said.

„When we looked at it, the thing with the Penguins sounded good,“ he said. „But that was not part of the decision-making process.“

The potential for traffic congestion around Station Square hurt Forest City's proposal, along with the impact on existing businesses at the South Side hot spot, River said. The plan called for relocating some businesses to make way for a temporary casino.

„There’s already development over there,“ he said. „What we would have done is knock people out of business.“

Board members chose Barden because of the easy access to his site, his promise to open within 16 months of getting a license, and his commitment to creating a „flagship“ casino, Rivers said.

The fact that Barden is black was a bonus – not the reason he was awarded the license, Rivers said. When the board met privately before awarding the licenses, members focused on Barden’s business acumen and potential for success.

„It brought a big smile to my face because he happens to be black,“ said Rivers, who is black. „The color of his skin had nothing to do with his ability to perform.“

Some industry officials have speculated that the Pittsburgh license, which costs USD 50 million, could be worth five or six times that amount.

Barden has said he has no interest in selling the license or his business.

„Why would you want to get rid of something that’s going to generate millions and millions of dollars?“ Rivers said.