

# Casino showdown

An Application for a members' club licence for a new gaming facility at MovieTowne, lodged since December 2006, has triggered a slew of objections from an association of local members' clubs, who are claiming a moral high ground as the casino industry positions itself for survival after repeated threats by Prime Minister Patrick Manning to shut the industry down. The application hearing will come up for hearing once more today in the Port-of-Spain Magistrates' Court with the last witness expected to take the stand.

The application was made by Golden Entertainment Members' Club in December 2006. The proposed gaming facility was originally billed as "Princess Members' Club," according to posters placed around the 35,000 square foot construction site of the new Fiesta Plaza that lies 150 yards at the back of the current MovieTowne Cineplex at Invaders Bay. Fiesta Plaza is Phase II of a three-phase business development plan for MovieTowne, according to its owner Derek Chin.

The new gaming facility which was advertised on MovieTowne's Cineplex screens briefly at the start of the year triggered a firestorm of objection from persons concerned that a new casino would be opening in an entertainment facility with "mainly children" as its patrons.

It also brought the new casino to the attention of the Association of Members' Clubs (AMC), a small group of members' gaming clubs, including Eastside Recreation Club, Island Club, St James Club and Crystal Palace Tobago, led by Ma Pau Manager Brian Phillips.

Ma Pau had previously bid to set up an outlet at MovieTowne, but was rejected by Chin who said that he was looking for a proposal that met international standards and that would "mesh" with the carefully constructed environment that he had

created at MovieTowne.

Derek Chin last week hit out at the objectors to the licence saying that in his view they were trying to maintain a "cartel" over the local gaming industry, echoing Moore who put to Phillips in cross examination that the AMC was trying to establish an oligopoly and that they were afraid of "high class" competition.

He admitted that in negotiating the lease for the proposed Golden Entertainment facility he had dealt with "Princess people" but revealed to the court that what he understood is that Princess was sub-letting the facility to Golden Entertainment.

All of this as repeated construction delays have pushed the late 2006 scheduled opening of Fiesta Plaza back. Chin expects the Plaza, which will be cordoned off from the rest of MovieTown and will have separate staircases and a turnstile, to be ready within the next two months.

When the Golden Entertainment licence application came up for hearing earlier this year, the AMC lodged an objection on several grounds. They were joined by a group called "Concerned Citizens of Trinidad and Tobago" and the Union of Lottery and Members Clubs Workers. Another group, the Christian Union Against New Gambling, which was set up in 2003, was also later added to the objectors.

The AMC objected on the basis of the Prime Minister's 2006/2007 Budget Address in which he said the Government was against the operation of casinos.

"The emerging trends in casino-type gaming activities are of great concern to the Government, particularly its rapid spread in urban, rural, and semi-rural communities," Manning said, noting the Government was totally against the operation of casinos and all casino-type establishments. "Global research findings have shown that the gaming industry can destroy the

financial security of families, negatively impact marriages, encourage deviant behaviour among children, undermine work ethic, cause increases in crime, including that of money laundering, and give rise to problem gamblers.

“The Government is strongly against the proliferation of these casino-type establishments in Trinidad and Tobago,” Manning told Parliament. Manning ominously said his Government was banning the importation and use of slot machines.

The Prime Minister though did not seem to be proposing the shut-down of all gambling though, leaving the door open for Lotto and Play Whe, both of which are operated by the Government-owned National Lotteries Control Board (NLCB)).

To date, the ban on slot machines “with immediate effect” has not, in fact, happened. The Prime Minister has changed his position, reportedly opting to “phase out” slot machines instead.

The AMC said that it was “concerned” about “the PM’s concerns” and in the interest of stopping the proliferation of new gambling facilities was lodging its objection. Phillips, taking the witness stand in the ongoing licence hearing, admitted under cross-examination by Golden’s lawyer Christlyn Moore, that the AMC had let other applications “slip through the net”.

Phillips said that he had written to the Prime Minister (two brief letters from the PM’s Office were brought to court) and had subsequently had talks with Minister in the Ministry of Finance Conrad Enill. He said that a representative from Princess Club (which is not a member of the AMC) by the name of ‘Chuck Frost’ had accompanied him to these meetings. He claimed that he was given an ultimatum by Enill: “The more clubs open up, the faster the Prime Minister is going to shut down the industry.”

The AMC also objected to the Golden Entertainment licence on

the basis that they are actually a Turkish-owned and controlled company. One lawyer in the application hearing made a submission alleging that the licence application was not bona fide, with another lawyer claiming that two Turkish nationals listed as members of the "General and Wine Committee" in Golden's application papers lodged with the court were "running the company".

But Moore vehemently argued against the objection to the supposed foreign connections of Golden Entertainment, saying that there was nothing wrong with being a non-national of Trinidad and Tobago and pointing out that Golden Entertainment was not to be equated with Princess Club, which does have foreign connections.

Princess Club Trinidad, or Princess Entertainment Corporation (Trinidad and Tobago) Limited, of 44 Independence Square, Port-of-Spain, lists as its director Hamdi Karagozoglu, the Vice President of Princess Hotel & Casino. It is part of a Turkish-owned group of companies known as the Princess Group which has hotels, casinos and restaurants in several countries including Belize, St Maarten, Turkey and Slovenia. Moore, listed as a member of the Golden Entertainment Members Club, is herself the corporate secretary of Princess Club Trinidad.

But Ibrahim Yetkin, General Manager of Princess Club Trinidad, who has been at every single hearing of the Golden Entertainment licence application so far, denied that Princess Trinidad had any connection with Golden Entertainment. And shortly after the licence hearings began, all references to Princess were deleted from posters promoting Fiesta Plaza.

Yetkin said that he was only coming to the application hearings because he was concerned with "the interests of Trinidad and Tobago". When asked if he thought that the wave of objections that has almost swamped the relatively simple licence application made Trinidad and Tobago less of an ideal investment destination he said that Trinidad remained a

“favourable” choice for investment but added that “everywhere is good for investment.”

Whether Golden Entertainment Members Club or Princess Members Club will be opening its new doors alongside other planned proprietors such as Zanzibar and Trader Jack’s will depend on the licensing committee’s ruling.