

# Third casino ship gets a thumbs-up

Port Canaveral – The gambling business at Port Canaveral is about to get larger and more competitive.

After a sometimes-heated debate Wednesday, port commissioners voted unanimously to allow a third gambling vessel to operate out of the port.

Las Vegas Casinos Lines LLC plans to start operating a 253-foot-long, 900-passenger vessel out of Brevard County's seaport in December or January. The business would have 150 to 200 employees, company officials said.

The ship would join two other gambling ships – one each operated by Sterling Casino Lines and SunCruz Casinos. The Sterling ship has a capacity of 1,744 passengers, while the SunCruz ship can hold up to 1,200 passengers.

Representatives for Sterling and SunCruz argued against the proposal, saying the port's slumping casino ship business cannot sustain a third ship, and everyone's business would suffer.

The Las Vegas Casino Lines proposal involves Larry Mullin, the former longtime director of sales and marketing for Sterling.

Mullin said his new venture would concentrate on drawing passengers from the Orlando convention market.

He described it as a different focus than Sterling or SunCruz – a point contested by both of those companies.

Mullin said his company acquired its ship from a South Florida gaming cruise company that went into bankruptcy protection.

Las Vegas Casino Lines would allow Orlando-area meeting

planners to charter the ship on a regular basis. The company would supplement that business by operating daily offshore gambling excursions, like Sterling and SunCruz do.

Mullin said, within a year of starting cruises, the company expects that most of its business would come from meetings and convention groups.

Raising his voice, Gary Inks, vice president of sales and marketing for Ocean Casino Cruises, the parent company of the SunCruz brand, said the Las Vegas Casino Lines proposal would damage Sterling and SunCruz at a time of declining passenger counts on their vessels, because of the increase in Florida of various forms of land-based gambling.

Inks said he also was representing Sterling's interests at the meeting.

For port commissioners, approving the venture centered on a debate over whether to restrict free enterprise and business competition; or increase the presence of gambling, possibly at the expense of the port's public image, while introducing a third ship that could harm Sterling and SunCruz. Those two companies have been strong sources of revenue for the Port Authority for the last decade.