

## Casino backers walk away from table



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The question of casinos in North Jersey will be on the ballot in November.

**BY JOHN BRENNAN**  
STAFF WRITER , THE RECORD  
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The leaders of a campaign that was launched just last month to drum up support for a measure to allow casino gambling in North Jersey suspended its operations on Thursday, citing grim public and internal polling data on the Nov. 8 ballot question.

Jeff Gural, the operator of The Meadowlands Racetrack, and Paul Fireman, a former Reebok chief executive, issued a joint statement announcing that they were ending the advertising campaign "OUR Turn NJ."

The suspension of the campaign by two of the most high-profile backers of casino expansion — both of whom have proposed casinos in the northern part of the state — reflects a shift in public sentiment away from the proposal that has put it in jeopardy. Gural has expressed support for a casino as an extension of the new grandstand that opened at the racetrack in 2013, and Fireman has proposed a multibillion-dollar casino resort next to his Liberty National Golf Course in Jersey City.

The men said a poll they commissioned found that just 37 percent of New Jersey residents favor amending the state constitution to end Atlantic City's nearly four-decade monopoly on casino gambling by allowing a pair of casinos to be built in North Jersey, while 50 percent opposed it.

The internal survey also found that only 10 percent of state residents have “a high level of confidence” that state officials would direct the tax revenues from the state's casinos as they are supposed to do under the resolution. The ballot question includes a formula that would divert an estimated \$150 million in new casino tax revenues annually to promote non-gambling economic redevelopment in Atlantic City.

The ballot question does not specify a tax rate at the proposed new casinos, which could be built anywhere north of New Brunswick.

Earlier this week, a Rutgers University poll showed 58 percent oppose the measure and 35 percent support it.

“We believe deeply that gaming expansion to Northern New Jersey is a remarkable opportunity that should not be squandered,” Gural and Fireman said in their statement. “We have committed \$4 billion in private investment to this state to create world-class resort destinations with gaming. The benefits include 43,000 new jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars in recaptured revenue — a rare opportunity for New Jersey. In addition, as New York debates allowing gaming in New York City, it is critical that we beat them to market or risk losing this opportunity permanently.

“The data, however, speaks for itself,” they added. “The current political climate in New Jersey and voters' concerns about the lack of details relating to the effort have proved overwhelming.”

Mistrust in state officials and a related sense of skepticism that the new casino tax revenue would be properly spent was a significant concern for a majority of voters, the men said.

Jim Kirkos, president of the Meadowlands Regional Chamber, said his group would continue its efforts to promote casino expansion, both online and on social media, until the Nov. 8 vote despite what he called the “disappointing news” of the OUR Turn campaign's retreat.

“Today we are calling on other interested parties to come into the debate with their own messages,” Kirkos said.

“Labor, education, local finance, senior advocates, horse racing interests, and even Atlantic City casino operators who desire to be part of North Jersey gaming have seven weeks left to mobilize their constituencies. This is a wake-up call. We heard it.”

State Sen. Paul Sarlo, D-Wood-Ridge, one of the most high-profile backers in the Legislature of adding casino locations, said he believed that a year of headlines about the near-bankruptcy of Atlantic City has turned voters off of the idea of building new casinos in the northern part of the state.

“This news makes it more difficult for the referendum to pass, but we’re not giving up on it,” Sarlo said. “But if it was to go down, the biggest loser in the whole process will be the Atlantic City region.”

Sarlo said if voters reject the measure at the ballot box on Nov. 8, he would not support the inclusion of a subsidy for Atlantic City in any future proposal to extend casino gambling beyond Atlantic City. Given Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop’s lack of enthusiasm for Fireman’s casino plan, he added that he wished the resolution had specified just one casino license — for the Meadowlands Sports Complex.

Assemblyman Ralph Caputo, D-Essex, a former Atlantic City casino executive and a supporter of extending casino gambling, said the parties most likely to benefit from OUR Turn NJ’s retreat are the Atlantic City casinos, which are now less likely to face new competition, and the casinos in New York and Pennsylvania that have been attracting gamblers from North Jersey for the past decade.

Caputo agreed with Gural and Fireman that opponents of the casino proposal had exploited widespread cynicism about elected officials in their campaigns.

Politicians and business leaders in South Jersey have aggressively opposed the expansion proposal, holding news conferences, buying ad time on television and forecasting a collapse of the region’s economy if voters were to approve the measure.

Bill Cortese, the leader of Trenton’s Bad Bet, which identifies itself as a group of “community leaders, unions, businesses, and residents” and has advertised extensively in recent months against the proposal, took aim at Gural and Fireman in his response to their announcement on Thursday.

“Trenton’s Bad Bet will not be distracted by billionaire developers throwing temper tantrums because they don’t get what they want” he said in a statement. “The casino expansion referendum otherwise known as Question One will hurt New Jersey families [and cost] the state tens of thousands of jobs and billions in economic losses.”

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