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Casino appeal is out of time

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DIAMONDHEAD — The time for Jacobs Entertainment to file legal challenges to a Board of Supervisors zoning decision has lapsed, leaving prospects dim that the company will develop a casino west of Yacht Club Drive.

For months, the Colorado-based company had fought for a zoning change that would allow construction of a \$150 million hotel-casino complex west of Yacht Club Drive and south of Interstate 10. The general area contained boating facilities, a yacht club and more than 200 private homes before Hurricane Katrina, but was heavily damaged by the 2005 storm.

Individual and corporate owners of adjoining property had applied for a change that would allow the casino development by Jacobs. If granted, the move would have shifted current zoning designations from single-family residential and highway commercial to commercial resort district. The county Planning Commission previously recommended the change.

That was turned down by Hancock County supervisors in a 3-2 vote on April 6. Under state law, Jacobs had 10 days to challenge the decision by filing a bill of exceptions in Circuit Court.

That has not happened, according to the Circuit Clerk's office and County Attorney Ronnie Artigues. Spokesmen for Jacobs could not be reached for comment by the Sun Herald this week. Earlier, a company spokesman had said Jacobs has not filed for site approval in Diamondhead with the state Gaming Commission.

Traffic problems in the narrow approach road to the site from I-10 were a major consideration in the board's decision, said Supervisor Jay Cuevas. He and Supervisor Lisa Cowand, who both represent parts of Diamondhead, voted with Supervisor Rocky Pullman to defeat the zoning change.

"I'm glad to get it behind us," Cuevas said Thursday. "It was a great project. It just couldn't be where they were trying to put it."

The Jacobs proposal was not connected to another project, formerly known as Casino World, which already had received a necessary zoning change to build a casino on different South Diamondhead property. That land is located to the east of Yacht Club Drive. A joint partnership on that project was formed, but has never proceeded with construction.

The Jacobs project raised debate in Diamondhead, which also is immersed in a controversy over whether the community of 9,000 residents should incorporate as a city. No ruling has yet been issued on that question, although a Chancery Court hearing has already been held.

In the Jacobs issue, opponents said a casino would worsen traffic problems and ruin the future quality of life in South Diamondhead, where some property owners are still struggling to rebuild. Those in favor of the idea pointed to anticipated revenues, jobs and tax income a new casino may pump into the local economy.
