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Bingo bill dies, development moves ahead

May 13 2009 12:00AM By By Kay Kirkland Managing Editor

Enterprise developer Ronnie Gilley said last week the bingo bill may be dead for now, but the Country Crossing mega-entertainment park isn't.

"We're marching on," said Gilley last week after Alabama legislators allowed the Sweet Home Alabama bill to die in the Senate Rules Committee.

The bill, sponsored by Democratic Sen. Quinton Ross of Montgomery and Rep. Marcel Black of Tuscumbia, would have regulated and taxed electronic bingo in Alabama and allowed a statewide referendum. Its death, however, does not stop Gilley's plans for an electronic bingo hall at Country Crossing, where the primary focus will be on high-quality entertainment, celebrity-themed restaurants and luxury hotels.

"We're moving full steam ahead," Gilley said.

"Construction activity will pick up dramatically in the next two to three weeks."

The \$300 million entertainment complex once planned for Coffee County is being constructed south of Dothan in Houston County just off Highway 231 South. Gilley has said the electronic bingo hall would be a catalyst to launch the project and sustain it until the other business aspects of the complex are on sound footing.

Although Gilley believes approval of the bill and a favorable referendum would "have made it a little easier from a financial aspect and an investor pool" by clearly establishing electronic bingo laws, but Gilley said the bill's failure doesn't really change the project because electronic bingo is currently legal in the state.

"Bingo has been played electronically in Alabama for eight years," he said.

An uncertainty remains, however, in the court system, where Gov. Bob Riley's Gambling Task Force has taken the bingo battle. The task force filed an appeal asking the state Supreme Court to overturn a Lowndes County Circuit Court ruling requiring the Task Force to return 100 machines confiscated March 19 in a raid on the White Hall gaming facility between Montgomery and Selma.

Judge Mark Kennedy ruled March 28 that White Hall would be protected as long as it operates according to current law and pending the final outcome of any litigation regarding electronic bingo.

On April 17, the Supreme Court ruled the state could keep the machines until a final ruling is issued.

The court battle over bingo could decide the fate of Country Crossing in Alabama, Gilley has said, admitting the controversy in recent months has frightened investors, causing some to pull support for the project and requiring him to find others to step in.

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"It's unfortunate," Gilley said, that "politics" has gotten involved in the project.

"We're accustomed to obstacles. We wouldn't know how to act if things were just a little bit easier

Gilley, the most outspoken member of the Sweet Home Alabama Coalition, has accused Riley of protecting Indian casinos in Mississippi, a charge that the governor has denied.

Gilley also said that if Riley's attempts to outlaw electronic bingo through the courts is successful, "the only monopoly" in the state will be the Indian gaming facilities in Alabama, which are on federal land and are exempt from regulation by the state.

Gilley feels confident that the court will rule favorably for legal electronic bingo facilities if they interpret the law the way it is written in the state Constitution.

"We're trying to do something good for the community and for a state that's losing jobs," Gilley said, explaining that Country Crossing would employ more than 1,200 jobs and would generate \$2.2 million in tax revenues.

The Sweet Home Alabama bill would have created a network of developments across the state, including Milton McGregor's Victoryland, that would feature bingo and country music concerts. Coalition members had said taxing electronic bingo, which is currently not taxed, would have generated \$200 million in taxes statewide annually.

Opponents say the failure of the bill this year prevents gambling from being expanded in the state, but Gilley said the Sweet Home Alabama bill or a version of it will likely resurface next year.

Black was quoted in an Associated Press article as saying the electronic bingo issue needs to be addressed and clarified.

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