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Restaurant seen as lure to OTB bettors

By [Kathleen Edgecomb](#) Day Staff Writer

Operator, developer confident proposed NL parlor can succeed; council committee sets public hearing

New London - The only company allowed to offer Off Track Betting in the state says it can lure horse-betting enthusiasts to the downtown with a top-notch restaurant and could raise as much as \$65,000 annually in new revenues for the city.

Autotote Enterprises, which operates 12 OTB facilities, has teamed up with local developer William Cornish, who wants to open a sports bar at 24 Eugene O'Neill Drive that would offer live horse betting.

According to state statues, OTBs share 1.6 percent of their earnings with the host community. Autotote estimates that would be between \$60,000 and \$70,000 a year in New London, or roughly \$4 million in bets.

The City Council's Economic Development Committee has scheduled a public hearing for 5 p.m. Monday on the proposal.

Councilor Kevin Cavanagh, who visited an Autotote facility in Putnam Thursday, said the restaurant, called Winners, was well-established and patrons seemed to be betting "in a very leisurely, recreational way."

"I was very impressed by it," he said. "And I think Bill's committed to making this a first-class operation."

Cornish, who owns the building at the corner of Eugene O'Neill Drive and Golden Street, already has zoning approval for a restaurant. He said Thursday he would build the sports bar and manage it. He said he'll call it Copperwood, after two of his favorite materials.

City Councilors Margaret Curtin and Adam Spreccace agreed to schedule the hearing but both had reservations about the bringing more gambling to the area.

"The studies I've seen, addictions are pretty high around here," said Curtin, adding that teenagers and senior citizens are among those getting addicted.

"Norwich and New London have disproportionate rates of problem gambling," agreed Spreccace.

But he added that he would reserve judgment until after the public hearing and after he's visited an OTB site.

Autotote would offer live video-feed racing events but needs approval from the state legislature to do it. It first must get site approval from the city.

The proposed 4,000-square-foot restaurant would include a 13-by-10-foot area for betting.

"There are a lot of misconceptions out there," said William R. Sweeney, a regulatory analyst with TCORS of New London, who is representing Autotote. Most people remember the state-run OTB of years ago, where gamblers loitered about and the area was littered with losing ticket stubs, he said.

The modern day off-track-betting facilities are more sophisticated than the betting parlors of the past, he said. The new focus is on gaming as an accessory use to a restaurant.

Autotote approached the city in October with its proposal. Betting would be limited to thoroughbred, harness and greyhound races, and jai-alai events. Monitors would display odds and races from various tracks and facilities and bets would be placed with tellers and electronically with self-service automated machines.

All employees of both the restaurant and the OTB would be licensed by the state. Autotote purchased the OTB system from the state in 1993. It is regulated by the Connecticut Department of Special Revenue and the Gaming Policy Board. It employs 300 people at facilities in Bridgeport, Bristol, East Haven, Hartford, Milford, New Britain, New Haven, Norwalk, Putnam, Torrington, Waterbury and Windsor Locks. Over the past 15 years, the company has contributed more than \$65 million to state and local governments through taxes and revenue-sharing, according to Sweeney.

Based on surveys at the other locations, the New London Autotote expects 10 to 15 patrons an hour on weekdays and 20 to 25 an hour on weekends. The hours would be 11:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday; until 11 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday; and until midnight Friday and Saturday.

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