

Local developer Banks, Hard Rock in partnership to secure slots license

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A politically connected Baltimore developer has teamed up with Hard Rock International to bid on one of five Maryland slot-machine licenses, the Orlando-based restaurant and casino operator announced yesterday.

Hard Rock, which runs more than 120 cafe restaurants and several hotels and casinos around the world, has signed an exclusivity agreement with Baltimore's Banks Contracting Co. Inc., owned by Kenneth R. Banks, who is also treasurer of the state Democratic Party.

"We look forward to [creating] another sensational Hard Rock Casino and the possibility of developing a Hard Rock Hotel and Hard Rock Live entertainment facility," Banks said in a statement. Hard Rock Chairman James Allen said high personal income in Maryland and a "tremendous density of population" make the state an attractive development region.

The Hard Rock/Banks partnership, known as Maryland Gaming Group LLC, is interested in building a slots parlor in either Baltimore or near the Laurel Park racetrack in Anne Arundel County, according to Johnnie D. Bond Jr., an attorney representing the partnership. Although its contemplation of a hotel-

casino complex fits the type of development Baltimore is asking bidders to put forward, Bond said the city's \$36 million lease demands were "high," and "there are a lot of people concerned" about the state's 67 percent tax rate on slots proceeds.

Voters approved a constitutional amendment in November legalizing 15,000 slot machines at five Maryland locations. Preliminary applications are due Feb. 2 to a commission that will award the licenses in Cecil, Worcester and Allegany counties, in addition to Baltimore and Anne Arundel.

The city site must be on a small parcel of city-owned land in a warehouse district about a mile south of the Inner Harbor.

Baltimore's Hard Rock Cafe was the first tenant in the Power Plant complex created in the 1990s by local developer David Cordish, whose company has teamed up with Hard Rock on other casino projects. The Cordish Cos. has also indicated an interest in bidding for the Baltimore slots license. Yesterday's announcement from Hard Rock did not mention Cordish, and Bond said the Baltimore company was not involved "at the moment." The developer did not immediately respond to an interview request.

