State police deny politics behind action

By GREG GARLAND
Advocate staff writer

State police have singled out the Belle of Baton Rouge for intense scrutiny, spending more auditing time there than on the state's nine other riverboat casinos combined, records show.

State police recently put the Belle on notice that it faces "severe sanctions" for rule violations that were found during the agency's audit review of the boat's operations.

Although state police claim they have not treated the Belle any differently than other boats, auditing records obtained through a public records demand suggest the Belle is getting special attention.

Auditors have logged 685.5 hours at the Belle since it opened on Sept. 30, compared to only 21 hours on the Star at Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans. The Star opened a year before the Belle.

Like the other licensed casino boats — except the Belle — the Star has political connections to Gov. Edwin Edwards and/or powerful state legislators.

State Police Col. Kenny Norris said auditors spent so much time on the Belle because its records were in deplorable shape, and that politics was not a factor.

"Generally speaking, they have a mess over there," Norris said. "The record-keeping was in such bad shape it took auditors longer to find stuff. Based on what the auditors tell me, it was terrible."

Norris said he considered revoking the Belle's license because of the problems, but instead expects to levy a "big-time, substantial fine" with a warning that the next step is license revocation.

Norris said formal penalties will be proposed next week, after state police meet with officials from Argosy Gaming Co., the Belle's operator, to discuss the audit findings.

Argosy President Steve Norton acknowledged there were some problems in the first month after the Belle opened, but said that is common with any new business.

Norton and Belle General Manager Denny Bond said those problems were resolved within a month of the boat's opening. They said procedures have improved dramatically.

"I think any fine that has to do with violations should take into account the seriousness of the violations and when they occurred," Norton said, adding there was no intent by anyone at Argosy to do anything wrong.

Norton said it is not surprising problems were found in following hundreds of pages in detailed regulations, given the number of hours state police auditors have spent at the Belle.

"The more time spent on a particular audit, the more things that you are going to find," Norton said. "That's axiomatic."

Problems are going to happen in every operation." Asked if he thought politics played a part in the extra scrutiny given to the Belle, Norton responded, "I don't know how to respond to that... I hope not. Maybe it's just the convenience of the Belle being located in Baton Rouge."

[Graph showing hours spent on different boats]
Belle has license but not clout

By GREG GARLAND

Although the Belle of Baton Rouge ended up with one of Baton Rouge's two riverboat casino licenses, the real political clout always rested with real estate developer Charles Lambert. Lambert, a former state senator, is a powerful state legislator, one of the few remaining in the state's political class. Lambert's influence runs deep, and he has used it to his advantage, securing a license for the Belle, the company's casino project in Louisiana APL-AIG.

The Belle's ultimate goal was to secure a license for its proposed casino project. The casino was approved by the state and opened in 2009. The company invested over $100 million in the project, which has become a major tourist attraction in the area.

Metro Councilman Darrell Glasper's support for the Belle's license application was crucial to the company's success. Glasper is a key member of the state's legislature, and his approval helped to secure the necessary funding and support for the project.

Belle faced stiff competition from other casino operators in the area, but the company's strategic location and investment in the community helped it to stand out. The Belle has continued to be a popular destination for tourists and locals alike, and it has contributed significantly to the local economy.

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