

Bally's secures temporary extension

Medinah Temple casino OK'd until Sept. 2026 as permanent site proceeds



Bally's Chicago casino on Oct. 3, when officials held a ribbon-cutting ceremony. Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune

BY ROBERT CHANNICK CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The Illinois Gaming Board has granted Bally's Chicago a four-year-ownership license and a 12-month extension to operate its temporary casino at Medinah Temple.

The approvals Thursday give Bally's Chicago, which opened the temporary casino last month, until September 2026 to build out its permanent facility at the site of the Chicago Tribune's printing plant.

Mark Wong, vice president and general manager of Bally's Chicago, told the Gaming Board that the company may need all of that time to clear out the Tribune and construct the expansive casino and entertainment complex along the Chicago River.

"We're all very confident that we'll meet the timeline," Wong said. "However, it is a huge project, and it will probably take every bit of the two, two and a half years that will be required to build."

The Gaming Board also announced Thursday that the state has failed a second time to award an online-only sports betting license, with the only applicant withdrawing this week.

It is full speed ahead, however, for Bally's Chicago, the state's 15th casino.

The Gaming Board issued Bally's Chicago a temporary operating permit Sept. 8, enabling it to open the Medinah Temple facility. On Thursday, the board unanimously approved a four-year ownership license for Bally's Chicago through October 2027.

With the 12-month temporary casino extension, Bally's Chicago will be able to operate at Medinah Temple for up to three years.

Rhode Island-based Bally's won a heated competition last year, besting four other proposals with its plan to build a \$1.74 billion casino at the 30-acre Freedom Center printing plant site in River West. The permanent casino is expected to open in 2026.

The city's long-sought first casino opened quietly Sept. 9 in its temporary digs, a landmarked, 111-year-old Moorish-style amphitheater in River North that once housed the annual Shrine Circus. Bally's Chicago renovated the 130,000-square-foot Medinah Temple, filling the three-story, block-long building on North Wabash Avenue with nearly 800 slot machines and 56 gaming tables, an expansive blue-lit center bar, two restaurants and a coffee shop.

The temporary casino has drawn more than 145,000 visitors since opening, Wong said Thursday. During its first three weeks of operation in September, it generated

nearly \$6.7 million in adjusted gross receipts, which is the money kept after winnings are paid out, according to Gaming Board data.

While temporary casino licenses are for two years, both American Place in Waukegan and Hard Rock Rockford were granted 12-month extensions by the Gaming Board in June, allowing them to operate at their temporary locations for three years while building permanent casinos.

Bally's Chicago won't be able to begin construction at the permanent site until Tribune Publishing exits the Freedom Center. Built in 1981, the Freedom Center prints the Chicago Tribune, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Chicago Sun-Times and other newspapers. It has also housed the Chicago Tribune newsroom since 2021.

In May, Tribune Publishing reached an agreement with Bally's to vacate the printing plant by July 2024, with plans to relocate operations to the Daily Herald printing plant in Schaumburg, which it purchased for an undisclosed price.

As casino expansion continues, sports wagering took at least a small step backward in Illinois when the state struck out again this week in efforts to award an online-only sports betting license.

Approved in 2019, the Illinois Sports Wagering Act allows the state's casinos, horse tracks and seven of the largest sports venues to open both a retail and online sportsbook. It also created three online-only sports betting licenses. Last year, the state came up empty when four companies applied for the three online licenses, but none made it through the process.

The Gaming Board reopened the selection process and set a March 1 deadline, drawing two applications. One withdrew in July, leaving one qualified applicant.

DGC IL, a subsidiary of Las Vegas-based Digital Gaming Corp., was announced in July as the only qualified applicant for the online sportsbook license, which unlike other operators in the state would not be tethered to any casino, racetrack or sports venue.

On Thursday, Gaming Board Administrator Marcus Fruchter announced that DGC IL also withdrew its application earlier this week.

"So as a result, there are no qualified bidder or applicants, which means that this supplemental competitive bidding process for the online-only master sports wagering license will conclude without any licenses being issued," Fruchter said. "That's all that we have to say about that at this time."

There are nine operating sportsbooks in Illinois, with several more in the pipeline. In August, Illinois sportsbooks took in more than \$664 million in wagers and generated adjusted gross revenue of nearly \$47 million, according to the Gaming Board.

The state permanently waived an in-person registration requirement for sports betting in March 2022, opening the door in Chicago for national players such as FanDuel and DraftKings, which are partnered with downstate casinos. Nearly 97% of Illinois sports betting took place online in August, according to Gaming Board data.

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