WATCHDOG: CUT LOSSES WITH GAMING COMMISH
Board lets Wynn have its way, critics warn

By JOE OWINELL
and MARY MARKOS

The state’s beleaguered gaming commissioners are being played “like minor leaguers” and need to do their jobs — or be entirely replaced — watchdogs told the Herald.

The biting criticism comes after the blockbuster news that Wynn Resorts and MGM Resorts are in talks to possibly sell the $2.6 billion Everett casino that’s slated to open June 23. That’s after the commission found Wynn lied on its application, but let the casino giant keep its license.

MGM already runs the Springfield casino.

“The commissioners are not instilling us with a lot of confidence these days,” said Greg Sullivan of the Pioneer Institute. “It’s almost like Wynn treats them like minor leaguers.”

Sullivan, one-time state inspector general, added Springfield and Everett need somebody fighting on their side. David Tuerck, executive director of the Beacon Hill Institute, was even harsher.

“It’s time for a new Gaming Commission with new personnel. The process seems to be going off the rails.

“It’s time for new people and to bring order to it,” added Tuerck, an economics professor at Suffolk University. “Springfield needs it; Everett must be able to succeed.”

The Gaming Commission is set to meet Wednesday in Boston and Thursday in Springfield. A board spokeswoman said that’s when members can comment on the sale talks.

Trust in the commission began eroding when former commission chairman Stephen Crosby recused himself over the Everett land deal in 2013 and then resigned in 2018 to eliminate “distraction.”

The board was later embarrassed by news it had failed to detect sexual misconduct allegations and payoffs involving Steve Wynn; exercised a lack of transparency when investigating that issue; and settled for a slap-on-the-wrist $35 million fine against Wynn Resorts — what amounted to a minuscule fraction of potential profits.

“To me this is all a bitter pill to swallow,” Sullivan said about Wynn looking to drop its Everett casino and selling to MGM, another Las Vegas casino giant.

“It looks like they want to cash out. Make a quick buck. Where’s the commitment? What about the promises?” Sullivan said. “Wynn appears to be playing (the commission) to the end.”
NO SURE BET: The Encore Boston Harbor casino is aiming to open next month, but that could be delayed as its owner, Wynn Resorts, holds talks with MGM about a possible sale. The resort casino in Springfield, right, is owned by MGM.
"People are begging for reassurance this will all work," added Tuerck. "The current commissioners need to step aside and let new people take over."

Gov. Charlie Baker and other top pols have avoided criticizing the commission, instead deferring to it. Baker said Monday a possible sale is a "nerve-wracking time" for those in Everett and Springfield, especially people depending on both companies for a job.

"Any talk like this probably is cause for some concern," Baker said, adding the Gaming Commission should use its leverage to get to the bottom of the deal. Baker noted that 5,800 new jobs are at stake in Everett along with thousands more already at work in Springfield.

Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno said he was "hard-nosed" in his negotiations with MGM, guaranteeing his city yearly payments of millions of dollars in their community host agreement.

"If anything should change it puts me in a position of leverage to be able to extract more benefits for the city of Springfield," Sarno said. "Nothing could occur without the OK from myself and the Gaming Commission. So let's see what plays out and what doesn't play out."

House Speaker Robert DeLeo said the possible sale was "a surprise," coming about a month before the opening of the Everett casino.

"I plan to closely monitor these negotiations between Wynn Resorts and MGM Resorts and will work to ensure that the interests of the Commonwealth, including the host communities of Everett and Springfield, remain the focus," DeLeo said in a statement.

DeLeo stressed any license transfer in a sale would need majority approval from the Gaming Commission, and Wynn or MGM can hold only one such license in the state.