



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Joseph A. Griffo

Griffo and Picente urge release of reopening guidance for Vernon Downs

JOSEPH A. GRIFFO August 31, 2020

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New York State Sen. Joseph Griffo, R-I-C-Rome, and Oneida County Executive Anthony J. Picente Jr. today urged the Governor to release guidance for the reopening of Vernon Downs Hotel Casino.

The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in significant obstacles that have created real economic hardships for businesses and the people that they employ. Vernon Downs is one of many businesses in the region and throughout the state that have struggled. The facility recently announced that it would end its harness racing season early due to the casino being closed and no purse money derived from slot machines.

Even worse, Vernon Downs owner Jeff Gural has indicated that the facility could close for good in October. The facility employs around 300 people, supports surrounding businesses and the local economy, bolsters New York's equine industry and contributes millions of dollars a year to schools.

Casinos in the state have proven that they can reopen safely when the appropriate guidelines and protocols are in place to protect patrons and the public. Sen. Griffo and County Executive Picente said there is no reason that Vernon Downs cannot do the same.

Sen. Griffo and County Executive Picente have had several discussions with Gural, who has submitted an extensive plan to the New York State Gaming Commission that takes into account every precaution to protect the health and safety of their customers while still resuming businesses.

These efforts encompass all the physical distancing requirements and best practices outlined in the state's guidelines for shopping malls, including, but not limited to, adapting their floor plan to account for adequate social distancing, requiring face masks for all employees and customers at all times, installation of various plexiglass barriers between slot machines, upgrading their air filtration system, limiting hours and entrances, reducing capacity by 50 percent or more, temporarily eliminating table games, regular testing for employees and more.

"Supporting Vernon Downs is critically important for our region," Sen. Griffo said. "Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, I have spoken, written and advocated to the Governor and his administration in support of opening Vernon Downs and other state-licensed casinos and have spoken to Jeff Gural and local officials regarding this situation. I will continue to work on the behalf of employees, their families, local governments and the region during the pandemic and beyond to ensure that Vernon Downs is given every opportunity to be successful and thrive."

"Enough is enough," County Executive Picente said. "Vernon Downs has a viable plan to reopen and operate safely, but it continues to be left in limbo without any direction from the state. Governor Cuomo owes it to the hundreds of employees who work there, and the other businesses in our community that rely on Vernon Downs, to address their suffering and restore their livelihoods."