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Ohio Sports Betting Update: SPIRE Conditionally Approved for Licenses

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With no discussion, the Ohio Casino Control Commission (OCCC) on Wednesday gave conditional approval to SPIRE Institute to serve as a proprietor for a mobile sports betting operator and a retail sportsbook.



A shot during the Atlantic 10 Swimming Championships, which took place in February at the SPIRE Institute in Geneva, Ohio. SPIRE on Wednesday received conditional approval from the Ohio Casino Control Commission to serve as a sports betting proprietor. Its gaming partner, Out the Gate, said it hopes to launch – pending final approvals – sometime in the first quarter of 2023. (Image: SPIRE Institute/Facebook)

SPIRE Institute operates a large complex for youth and amateur sports and an academy for elite high school and post-graduate athletes in Geneva, about 40 miles northeast of Cleveland. Its facilities have also hosted numerous collegiate championship events. The company's application had [raised some eyebrows](#), particularly with responsible gaming advocates, considering the institute's ties to youth.

“Definitely a little surprised that there weren't questions about it,” Problem Gambling Network of Ohio Executive Director Derek Longmeire, who attended Wednesday's meeting in Columbus, told *Casino.org*. **“I know that the Casino Control Commission has to go through a thorough (review) to make sure they've got all their I's dotted and T's crossed. So, I expect that they've done all the things that they need to.”**

Officials from SPIRE attended the Wednesday morning meeting in Columbus, but did not make any comments to the commissioners. The panel then voted unanimously to accept the recommendation from OCCC staff.

Sportsbook Location TBD

After the vote, SPIRE Managing Director Jonathan Ehrenfeld told *Casino.org* that the retail sportsbook would not be located on the 800-acre campus that features a high school, football field, track, and indoor athletic complexes.

“We don't have a specific designated... in terms of exactly where it's going to be, but it's going to be off-campus,” he said. **“So, we're still working on details of the exact, precise space.”**

SPIRE was the last of 21 Type A (online) proprietor applicants that submitted its application by the July 15 deadline to be considered for a Jan. 1 launch date to be approved. [Executive Director Matt Schuler](#) told *Casino.org* after the meeting that was mostly coincidental timing, although he added that applicants the commission was already familiar with, such as the state's licensed casinos, did take less time to process.

An official with Out the Gate, SPIRE's partner for both the retail and online sportsbooks, told *Casino.org* that the company will not be among those starting on the universal launch date.

“We're hoping to be live in Q1 of 2023,” COO Lee Terfloth said Wednesday.

Approval Process Still Ongoing

Schuler said the conditional approval means commission staff must still inspect retail locations, check the equipment that will be used in sports betting, and review internal controls to ensure those abide by state regulations. That must happen before the licensees will be approved to start taking wagers.

All applicants that have been approved so far have been conditionally approved, and final approvals will not take place until closer to the Jan. 1 launch date, or a time when the operator is ready to start taking wagers.

The executive director also responded to what he called “some knee-jerk reaction” to SPIRE’s application in gaming trade publications.

“Frankly, just my own observation because I read publications and what people say: For any brick-and-mortar sportsbook, they have to have a security guard and a scanner for IDs in order to keep out people under 21. That’s not the case with bars and taverns that are going to have gaming,” he said.

Holly Gross, an attorney with Benesch, Friedlander, Coplan & Aronoff who represents SPIRE, said the company will make sure that all of the legal requirements are in place prior to launching.

“We’re really thrilled about today’s decision,” she said. “Excited for the future.”

Economic Development Impact Key Factor

When Ohio lawmakers passed the sports betting law nearly a year ago, they gave the state’s casinos, racinos, and professional sports teams preferred access to licenses. But they also hoped to spur economic development opportunities across the state by encouraging other types of businesses located in the state to apply for licenses.

SPIRE’s complex is considered a major tourism draw to Ashtabula County, with reports indicating it has a \$50 million economic impact.

“ The General Assembly did not say you can’t locate one of these this far from a church, this far from a school or daycare, or whatever,” he added. **“It was about, having been found suitable, the economic development piece. That was actually critical in this because that was a threshold matter – to conduct significant economic**

development in the county in which the Type B sportsbook would be located. So, they (lawmakers) wanted that for Ohioans who were already engaged in this, and that's what the law says.

“There are probably people on all the different sides of this. The commission has one side, and that's to follow the black-and-white and four corners of the law.”

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