“It’s another step,” said Bob Tenenbaum, a spokesman for the company. Tenenbaum and Penn National officials are awaiting the court’s final imprimatur. A few minor issues are yet to be ironed out, said Tenenbaum, “but hopefully the court will agree with our timeline so that we can work them out and get the project moving.”

By IKE MGBATOGU

Contributing Writer

COLUMBUS - The start of the Hollywood casino construction on the west side of Columbus didn’t quite play out as planned for all involved because of a lawsuit.

But, it now appears everyone is singing Kumbaya and looking forward to getting the stalled

project rolling toward completion.

It wasn't kumbaya from the start, though.

Soon after discussion over the $400 million project began between the city and Penn National Gaming, the group that plans to build the casino, it quickly got mired in a tiff, with both sides stiffening their resolve not to budge. The bone of contention was the city's plan to annex the site of the proposed Casino before allowing its owners to gain access to sewer and water services. But Penn National objected to that proposal and later filed a lawsuit against Columbus, leaving the project dangling in limbo.

But now, there's good news as both sides agreed on a settlement, which pushed the project multiple steps closer getting off the ground.

That settlement came last week after the Columbus City Council unanimously approved a plan to settle with Penn National and even shelled out $15 million toward the construction of the casino, most of which will go to pay for the cost of environmental cleanup incurred by Penn National.

Even though Columbus lost its bid to annex the site of the casino and the agreement pretty much handed Penn National sort of a victory, it still wasn't all a loss for the city, which will still pocket about $24 million in taxes from the casino, not including the income taxes they will also corral off casino workers.

What's now left to finalize the agreement is for the U.S. District Judge Gregory L. Frost to approve it, which is expected to come after both sides submit documents agreeing to the deal.

Franklin County, which is only peripherally involved in the matter, also okay-ed the deal last week, by a vote of 3 – 0, setting the stage for groundbreaking to start soon, with expected opening in 2012.

Commissioner Marilyn Brown, who thinks the casino will boost local economy, is elated.

“This is about getting the jobs,” she said, adding, “Let’s get moving.”

Officials of Penn National are also eager to get things going.

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Meanwhile, in April, Penn National awarded the contract to manage the casino construction to a minority owned firm, Smoot Construction Company, based in Columbus. That immensely pleased Noel Williams, president of the Columbus Chapter of the NAACP, who is committed to economic diversity and opportunities for minority businesses in the city.

“It’s about jobs,” said Williams. “Economic growth and diversity inclusion for all minorities” is her top priority as the leader of the Columbus NAACP.

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