

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Sun, Dec. 17, 2006

On Wednesday, slots move into realm of reality

Two lucrative licenses will be awarded in the city. The effect of gambling on Philadelphia is unclear.

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The prospect of casinos in Philadelphia has been looming for so long, since Gov. Rendell signed a law legalizing slot machines on July 2004, that it has almost seemed hypothetical.

But the fact is that the state's first slots parlor opened last month in Wilkes-Barre, and this week, it's Philadelphia's turn to face reality.

On Wednesday, the state's Gaming Control Board is scheduled to cull the herd of applicants for lucrative Philadelphia slots licenses from five to the ultimate two.

After that, let the construction begin on projects expected to cost \$350 million to \$560 million.

Half a year later, gambling money could start flowing to support the governor's plan to reduce property and wage taxes by \$1 billion.

Will the effects of two slots parlors on Philadelphia be dramatic? For some who live nearby, most certainly. For the city as a whole, it's not as clear.

"Will it help draw people to Philly? I doubt anyone will be saying I can't wait to visit Philadelphia because it has casinos," said the Rev. Richard McGowan, a Boston College management professor.

Nor, he said, will those who come to the area for its history or culture be put off by them. More than anything, though, McGowan said, the city and the state will make money.

Here are the five contenders for the two licenses:

Foxwoods Casino Philadelphia, a \$410 million project in South Philadelphia to be built on a 30-acre parcel off Columbus Boulevard, north of Home Depot and Target. Developers say that by November 2008, they will have installed 3,000 slot machines, restaurants, shops, and a 2,000-seat entertainment complex. Investors include Quincy Jones, Comcast-Spectacor chairman Ed Snider, and 76ers president Billy King.

TrumpStreet, a \$300 million complex on 30 acres at the former Budd plant site, at West Roberts Avenue and Fox Street in Nicetown/East Falls. The project calls for 3,000 slot machines and 70,000 square feet of retail, dining and entertainment. Investors in the project include Donald Trump; Brian Tierney, publisher of The Inquirer and Daily News; and the owner of Chickie's & Pete's.

Riverwalk Casino, a \$380 million venture on 11.5 acres at the site of a defunct city incinerator on Delaware Avenue at Spring Garden Street in Old City. The project led by Planet Hollywood with several local investors would include 3,000 slot machines, six restaurants and two lounges.

Sugarhouse Casino, a \$550 million project on 22.6 acres on North Delaware Avenue at Shackamaxon Street in Fishtown. Plans call for 3,000 slot machines, restaurants, a plaza, and a pedestrian promenade.

Pinnacle Entertainment plans a \$350 million project for 33 acres on North Delaware Avenue/Richmond Street at Dyott Street, also in Fishtown. Plans call for a waterfront lagoon that would be converted to an ice rink in winter, restaurants, shops, and a movie complex with at least a dozen screens.

Depending on which sites are chosen - at least one will be on the waterfront - the specific effect on life in the city won't be known for a while. But some indisputable changes are in the offing, some good and some not so good.

Most people will see increases in traffic. The casinos estimate they will draw 5 million to 6 million people a year each.

For a while, there will be construction jobs and, after that, a lot of service jobs - a promised 900 to 1,200 at each depending on the two that are picked. They all promise contributions to civic causes and charities.

Property taxes and city wage taxes, Rendell and other politicians have promised, will shrink. A city study projected the wage tax would drop from 4.3 percent for residents in 2006 to 3.6 percent in fiscal 2010. That would be a gain of about \$6.70 a week for someone making \$50,000 a year.

Anti-casino activists don't see the selling points compensating for the downsides and are concerned the good parts of the city's image will be tarnished by the new gambling focus.

"The amount of wage-tax reduction we're getting is a pittance," said Matt Ruben, a board member of the Northern Liberties Neighbors Association.

"I fear that it [casinos] will alter and probably cheapen the visitor image of the city," he said. "Philadelphia is a city that has relied on the hospitality industry for the past 15 years or so."

Plus, he said, the traffic impact of two casinos could be crippling in their surrounding areas.

Harris Steinberg, executive director of Penn Praxis, the University of Pennsylvania's urban planning arm that is leading the city's waterfront planning initiative, said the conversations about casinos at the state level had not dealt with the impact of the city's larger civic vision for the waterfront, its residents, or the overall traffic picture of Delaware Avenue.

"I have not seen anything that indicates that sound planning principles are being used for the siting and design of casinos," Steinberg said.

In the breach, Penn Praxis and the city have commissioned their own traffic study that factors in all potential development along the Delaware - providing a needed picture of future traffic problems not addressed by the Gaming Control Board or the casino applicants.

Ruben, the community activist, said that if two casinos were placed along the waterfront, the result could be devastating.

"I fear that the communities, and perhaps the entire riverfront area of the city, could turn into a casino town, and that's a prospect that is depressing," he said.

Ruben and others have been trying to delay a decision, arguing in part that the public comment was closed June 2, while the companies seeking licenses have changed their proposals.

The results on the financial side are indisputable, however, said Boston College's McGowan.

"It's certainly a win for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia," he said.

Money that had been going across state borders to New Jersey and Delaware gaming houses will now stay in Philadelphia, McGowan said.

"The city is certainly going to keep money at home," he said.

The city's Gaming Advisory Task Force estimated that two city casinos would generate \$668 million to \$747 million in their first full year of operation. About half of the money gambled, the task force estimated, would have been spent elsewhere.

An added bonus, McGowan said, will be to restaurants and shops near the sites that stand to benefit from the increased traffic.

"There's definitely a multiplier effect," he said.

But, McGowan points out that social problems will follow. While crime-rate changes are uncertain - since police often have a greater presence in gambling areas - a likely rise will be seen in compulsive gambling, the divorce rate and bankruptcies.

Ruben said the zeal for politicians to deliver on promises and for casinos and governments to collect their winnings overtook the need for a reasoned approach.

"Casino development was conducted in a way that showed utter contempt for the public, particularly the citizens of Philadelphia," he said.