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Neighbors not feeling lucky

Developers consider South Philly a prime location for two casinos, but residents disagree and stated their case at two community meetings.

By [Alexis Abate](#)

May 26, 2005

As with all gambles, it's a case of risk vs. potential reward. Supporters say bringing slots-only parlors to South Philly will boost city revenues and tourism and provide hundreds of job opportunities.



But critics - including, it seems, most residents - argue that the darker side of casinos, including crime, addiction and increased traffic, will drag down the area.

The state Gaming Control Board holds the cards, and ultimately will decide which proposals to approve for two Philadelphia casinos, each consisting of 3,000 to 5,000 slots.

Mayor John Street appointed the Philadelphia Gaming Advisory Task Force to study the community impact of slots parlors and to make recommendations. The process includes soliciting neighborhood feedback, which the task force did at a public hearing for the First Council District last Wednesday at the Independence Seaport Museum.

Residents near the stadium complex, who could be the most affected by the arrival of slots, followed up with a meeting of their own the next night.

Street, local politicians and about 100 residents attended the task force's meeting. The task force consists of three committees - economic, social impact and site evaluation.



"If we organize right, look at the questions and community input, we can make the kind of recommendations they will pay attention to," the mayor said.

Street said the waterfront would be a prime spot for gaming facilities, but stressed that neighbors' comfort must be taken into consideration.

"We don't want to sacrifice the quality of life with people who have to deal with the decisions made," he said.

THE TASK FORCE is evaluating several potential casino sites, including Center City/Market East, the Delaware River waterfront and the Naval Base.

In November, Caesars Entertainment Inc. released plans for a \$350 million multiphase project on an 18-acre waterfront property it previously optioned at Columbus Boulevard and Reed Street. The project, which could be operating by 2008, would include a 3,000-slot casino, five restaurants, retail space, a 2,500-seat auditorium/theater and a 3,000-space garage.





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Fourteen facilities are expected to be developed statewide.

Residents at last week's meetings said they fear any South Philly locations will be too close for comfort. They cited traffic concerns, gambling addiction, increased advertising and a change in quality of life as reasons for opposing gaming in their back yards.

But members of the task force urged the neighbors to have realistic expectations.

"It's not a discussion whether it's coming or not, it's just what we're going to do with it," said David Auspitz, of the task force's Economic Impact Committee.

Paul Levy, co-chairman of the task force's Site Evaluation Committee and executive director of the Center City District, said committee members are not for or against the facilities - they are simply the messengers.

First District Councilman Frank DiCicco said he understands the strong interest in the long-developing area.

"Most of the concentration and interest has been within the First Council District," he said.

Although he advised the community that no license has yet to be issued, some residents are still wary of the prospects.

"The possibilities are very daunting," said Patty Griffin, of the 200 block of Wharton Street.

Electricians union chief John Dougherty, head of the Pennsport Civic Association and a potential candidate for mayor in 2007, said he believes the community's proposals will be influential.

"Our concerns will be listened to, and respected and carried on," he said. "I believe we will have a significant role in where [the slots-only facility] goes."

Developers in control of a location will submit their ideas and objectives. In turn, the Gaming Control Board has the power to grant licenses to these companies. Gov. Edward Rendell, state senators and representatives from Congress appointed the board, which consists of lawyers, judges, political representatives, a former FBI agent and chief officers of organizations.

According to members of the task force, the facilities will boost the city's revenue as well as its entertainment and tourism allure. But civic-association leaders and community members are more concerned with lasting impact on their individual neighborhoods.

"We don't want it there," Dougherty said of the Columbus and Reed site. "We can't handle any more traffic."

But that's not the only worry. Francis Kelly, of 1700 block of South Front Street, is fretting a potential increase in crime and billboard blight close to the EOM Athletic Association, Front and Moore streets.

SOUTH OF THE waterfront site, neighbors in the Stadium **Sports Complex Special Services District** are distraught over the possibility of both slots-only facilities being erected at the Naval Base.

Shawn Jalosinski, the district's executive director, has conducted preliminary traffic analyses with the help of consultants to prove that the area already handles an extensive lineup of events unmatched in other areas of the city. According to Jalosinski's testimony, a 3,000-slot facility could generate about 10 million additional vehicle trips to a location that already draws 5.5 million - with only one entrance site for the Naval Base on Broad Street.

"Last year, we hosted over 400 events with 8.2 million visitors," said Barbara Capozzi, president of the Packer Park Civic Association and a real-estate broker whose firm is selling the upscale Reserve at Packer Park townhomes at 20th and Pattison.

Not only is the sports-district community fed up with being accommodating, but the roadways and infrastructure are just not enough, said Judy Cerrone, community director of District 1 of the Stadium Complex Special Services District.

"Even the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation opposed building," Cerrone said, adding that she believes the purpose of the task force is "to humor the people."

The civic leader was more content with the original plans for the Philadelphia Naval Business Center, which included warehouses and companies generating more jobs.

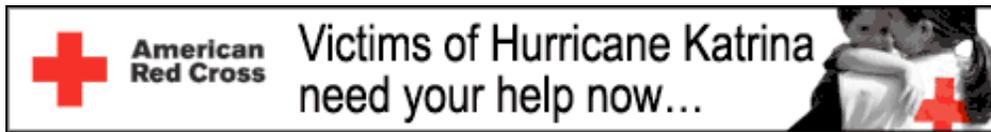
Jalosinski testified last week that the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation's plan pinpoints the slots-only facilities at the exact site where the warehouses would have been.

The communities are vowing to do what they can to prevent that plan from materializing.

"Until the ribbon is cut elsewhere, we'll fight it," Capozzi said.

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