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Cut locals in on slots action

Funding for special services districts around casinos must be a condition for any gaming licenses awarded in Phila.

By A.J. Thomson

The Eagles play in town 10 times a year. The Phillies play 81 home games. Add in the Sixers, Flyers, college games and some concerts, and the stadium district is in use for at least four to five hours about 200 days a year. That's a lot of humanity to deal with on a regular basis. However, the total attendance of all these events doesn't compare with the expected hordes at the casinos that could be sited on the Delaware riverfront.

After a sporting event or concert, the sounds of honking horns and cheering masses are replaced by a different noise that comforts those who live within shouting distance of our sports palaces: the quiet whirring of the stadium district's street sweepers or tree-planting equipment or the laughter of kids playing on new equipment at a local rec center.

When they cut the deals for the sports complex, city officials wisely included a special services district as a concession to South Philly residents. The district demonstrated that, as the city and state coordinate development to benefit the region, those closest to the investment need protection from the negatives. This protection, coupled with public-improvement and social projects, can help make large-scale projects work, or at least be more palatable to local residents.

This approach should be applied to Philadelphia casinos.

Within a quarter-mile of any of the potential sites, there are more people living in the shadows of the to-be-constructed towers and parking garages than within even a half-mile of the stadiums. These riverfront areas are among the fastest-growing in the city, so the numbers will continue to grow.

As current law stands, we see a vast imbalance between the burden to be suffered by our riverfront communities and the profits that the companies and our commonwealth will make from casino development. To get things closer to equilibrium two important protections must be codified:

A special services district must be funded in the millions of dollars annually by any casino lucky enough to become a part of our city and neighborhoods.

The city and state must fund significant infrastructure and public safety commitments.

The Gaming Control Board *must* make the creation of the special services district a condition of any gaming license awarded in Philadelphia. The amount of funding - millions will be needed - should be set as a license condition, and that amount should be adjusted annually for inflation.

Applicants for these licenses recognize the need to abate the ill caused by millions of gamblers descending upon residential communities, though they do not highlight those problems in their applications. Some even realize that a better community surrounding their establishment will be good for business.

However, communities negotiating with the developers have no power to enforce agreements. The state, which is a greater-than-equal partner in these casinos, must force the developers' hands. The local political leadership regained zoning control of these sites and also helped secure dedicated funds for the school district. Perhaps that same

communities.

Those of us who live along the river have been told time and time again that all parties will protect us from increased crime and other dangers that come with casinos. Now that the time has come for licenses to be awarded, it's time to turn those promises into commitments.
