



How To Shake Down A Casino!

Sports SSD Shows Way

by Tony West

When a giant industry plops down next to a small-scale urban community, it is guaranteed to bring outsized problems in its wake.

Take, for instance, the two casinos with which Philadelphia neighborhoods will be saddled. They're going to bring high volumes of traffic, unruly revelers, traffic, construction nightmares and traffic....

Like what happened in the South Philadelphia neighborhoods adjacent to the new stadium complex. There, a solution was found to ensure this giant industry's profits would directly help pay to mitigate quality-of-life concerns for neighborhoods like Packer Park and Whitman.

When the new stadiums were first proposed in the 90s, the large, private, lucrative sports companies were lobbying to win megabucks of public funding. At that point, these neighborhoods squawked. The old Veterans Stadium and Spectrum had been nightmares for neighbors who suffered from the unplanned impact of huge entertainment centers.

So a deal was cut at the City level. The Phillies, Eagles and Comcast-Spectacor would jointly fund the **Sports Complex Special Services District** to the tune of \$1.1 million a year, with a mission to ease the pain for residents.

After years of tense negotiations, the new SCSSD kicked off in 2002. It serves 9,000 residents in 4,200 households south of Oregon Avenue, between 7th and 20th Streets.

The result: neighbors, for the first time ever, are happy with their 300-lb., 7-foot locker-room mates. "The sports teams have been absolutely marvelous," said Barbara Capozzi, leader of Packer Park Civic Association and a director on the SCSSD board.

"They are completely accessible to the community," emphasized Judy Cerrone, another SCSSD director who represents the zone closest to the stadiums. "We never have a problem talking directly with them when we need to."

Unsolved problems remain. But the \$1.1 million the teams are spending on SCSSD has gone a long way to solve problems. And therein lies the message they would pass on to communities faced with a casino.

"If you know you have no choice, you bargain," Cerrone counsels. "You spend six days a week in the Mayor's Office, for however long it takes."

"Special Services Districts can be the best or the worst of solutions for residents impacted by a proposed high-octane use," Capozzi concurs. "You have to stay on top of the process from the beginning."

SCSSD has a handsome budget with a long-term guarantee. It is light on staffing, however. The district has just one full-time employee, Executive Director Shawn

Jalosinski. His background as a traffic engineer helped win Jalosinski the post, after a lengthy and contentious talent search.

Jalosinski has earned good marks in the community for diplomacy, diligence and accessibility. "You see him out on the streets 24/7," Capozzi notes. But the bulk of SCSSD's services are contracted out.

"Our mission," Jalosinski said, "is to protect community interests, improve neighborhood quality of life, and promote efficient operation of adjacent sports venues." Programs include daily sidewalk and street cleaning, leaf pick-up, new street lighting, massive tree plantings and tree care, and other beautification projects. The district throws a Halloween party for children and organizes a fan giveaway for senior citizens. It donates annually to every school in the district and underwrites sporting programs for area kids.

But the chief burden is traffic control. "Each month, SCSSD mails every household a calendar summarizing instances where local travel might be affected by high volumes of event traffic. It is a simple and effective way to keep neighbors informed so they may plan accordingly," Jalosinski explained.

SCSSD has completed a transportation improvement study, identifying traffic calming projects for the neighborhoods. Traffic in this area will keep increasing with the developing Navy Yard to the south and Ports to the east, Jalosinski stressed. An additional interstate exit is sorely needed, but nagging the State and Feds to build it will take at least 10 years.

"A partnership of stakeholders convenes to discuss Sports Complex traffic and parking operations," Jalosinski said. "The goal is continuous improvement. We evaluate previous events identifying what worked, what didn't, and what can be improved upon for next time."

Biggest unmet need at this hour is a better way of directing pedestrian flow, in Jalosinski's view. Because all pedestrians cross at grade level, they block auto traffic at peak times.

An SSD works much like a Business Improvement District (BID) or Neighborhood Improvement District (NID) --- but with one important difference. While BIDs and NIDs are paid for by a tax surcharge on businesses or residents, an SSD is wholly funded by certain large corporations. This funding may be voluntary, or it may be required contractually as part of an agreement with a government body.

So an SSD gives the community a free ride on extra services. That can be a wonderful deal. The challenge, though, is to ensure those services actually compensate for the extra hassles those corporations are causing it.

SCSSD was modeled on neighborhood commitments made by stadium owners in several other cities. But the Sports Complex, as designed, is the only SSD in America supported wholly by sports teams.

This SSD is a non-profit corporation. While a host of government officials sit on its board, only seven directors have voting privileges. They consist of one representative each from the three sports venues and one from each of four residential districts near the stadiums. So if the community representatives stick together, they can outvote the stadiums.

In practice, they never need to. Community leaders were compelled to present a unified front. Faced with that fact, the sports teams have been uniformly responsive and cooperative.

Political tensions flourished at the birth of SCSSD, which was long and difficult. Working out the details took at least four years of tense struggles over the structure, staffing and boundaries of the body.

In practice, leaders in community associations are the ones elected to the board. But there are four actual voting districts, in which every household casts one vote. Renters

and owners have equal standing. Ballots are mailed annually to each household by an independent arbitration agency. Response is high: In Cerrone's district, the smallest, 179 out of 211 households cast ballots in the 2006 election.

Everybody likes a winner and SCSSD has no foes today. "We think it's working excellently," said State Sen. Vincent Fumo. "The constituents are happy, the teams are happy. For all the parties involved, it resolved a lot of potential problems before they were able to really develop."

So if somebody is planning to drop a casino in the midst of your neighborhood, Cerrone and Capozzi recommend, make sure an SSD comes with it. Make sure it is funded to do the job it needs to do, and make sure you have the votes to control it.