

Pennsylvania gaming board accepting public requests to speak at Philadelphia casino hearings

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The pitchmen have unveiled their casino plans with videos and slide shows. Now, it's the public's turn to weigh in with questions, critiques, and concerns about the six proposals for a second gaming site in Philadelphia.

On Monday, the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board will begin accepting online requests to address commissioners at back-to-back public hearings April 11 and 12 at the Convention Center.

Everyone from residents to business owners and city officials is welcome to speak. Individuals will have five minutes; representatives for organizations will get 10.

Sen. Larry Farnese, a Democrat from South Philadelphia, said he did not detect the same rancor over casinos this time around. Farnese, whose district includes all six proposed projects, said neighbors at this point were engaged.

But it may start to get ugly.

Early public opinion ranges from "muted" (Chinatown) and "wait and see" (Fishtown) to "deeply troubled" (North Broad Street) and "unanimously opposed" (South Philadelphia).

Only one project - Wynn Philadelphia - is proposed for the Delaware River waterfront. One is pitched for the heart of Center City (Market8) and another on its northern edge (The Provence).

Three groups want to locate in South Philadelphia: Casino Revolution, Hollywood Philadelphia, and Live! Hotel & Casino.

With so many projects concentrated in the stadium district, the gaming board will hold a special hearing in South Philadelphia. Richard McGarvey, a spokesman for the board, said the agency was looking for a venue.

In 2006, when the state awarded two licenses in the city for the SugarHouse and Foxwoods casinos, the selections triggered fierce debate and protests over the advent of gaming. Anticasino demonstrators blocked construction crews at SugarHouse, and angry Chinatown residents heckled representatives of Foxwoods, which eventually lost its license.

Some issues, such as the impact of projects on traffic patterns and the social costs of gambling, will resonate from the last go-round. Others, such as adhering to new land-use guidelines for the waterfront, will be new to the debate.

Shawn Jalosinski, executive director of the Sports Complex Special Services District, which represents four South Philadelphia neighborhoods adjacent to the arenas, said the No. 1 concern was the impact of a casino on congestion.

The stadium complex draws 5.5 million vehicle trips a year, he said. A casino with 3,000 slot machines is likely to triple traffic by adding 10 million vehicle trips.

On the waterfront, Phil Stoltzfus, 31, is eager to address the gaming board. He is president of the Olde Richmond Civic Association, which represents the neighborhood directly across from the proposed Wynn Philadelphia.

He said the decade-old community group had not yet reached a consensus on Wynn's \$900 million project. Stoltzfus said the Olde Richmond board expected to meet soon with Wynn's representatives.

But as a homeowner since 2004, Stoltzfus objects to North Delaware Avenue's turning into a "casino district."

Stoltzfus also belongs to the Central Delaware Advocacy Group, a community group focused on advancing the goals of the city's master plan for the Central Delaware waterfront.

The plan, an outgrowth of the furor over waterfront casinos ignited by SugarHouse and Foxwoods, advocates for more accessible riverfront land and guards against citadel-style construction.

Stoltzfus said he feared that with Wynn's high-rise hotel, the city-supported waterfront plan would be "ignored or severely compromised."

John Chin, executive director of the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corp., said he would raise with the gaming board the issue of problem gambling in the Asian community.

"It's very real," Chin said, "and very tragic."

Chin said that if casinos were targeting their marketing to Asian gamblers, they should also be required to target counseling services to them.

"You can pick up a newspaper in Chinatown and see casino advertising each week and every week," he said. "Even the Valley Forge 'resort' casino is advertising in this community. They even have a billboard."

The neighborhood most organized at this point around the casino question is the northern edge of Center City. Long before the gaming board announced in June a reissuing of the city's second casino license, developer Bart Blatstein made it known he wanted the license.

More than two dozen neighborhood associations, schools, churches, and one synagogue have formed the North Broad Community Coalition to interact with Blatstein on what they view as quality-of-life issues. Blatstein, who has attended more than 35 meetings with groups, wants to use the former headquarters of The Inquirer and Philadelphia Daily News as the anchor for a casino-entertainment complex.

Among the coalition's top concerns: parking and traffic congestion, security and crime, litter and lighting.

Ed Panek, chairman of the zoning committee for the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, said the issue was "how the project would meld with the fabric of the community as it currently exists."

Kevin Greenberg, a coalition lawyer, said members had accepted that there would be a second casino in Philadelphia. But, he added, "if it's in our backyard, it has to address the real concerns of this community."
