

PlanPhilly.com

Some - including a SugarHouse consultant - say no to proposed casinos

- Wednesday, May 8, 2013
- By Kellie Patrick Gates

Two representatives of South Philadelphia community groups urged the Pennsylvania State Gaming Control Board not to award a casino license to any of the three applicants who would build near the stadium district.

Packer Park Civic President Barbara Capozzi said the opposition wasn't the typical Not In My Back Yard situation. It was more that she and her neighbors have already absorbed plenty in their back yards: Two stadiums, an arena and an entertainment complex.

“Surely, you can imagine what we already endure,” Capozzi said.

The three South Philadelphia proposals are:

- **Casino Revolution**, PHL Local Gaming, LLC, 3333 South Front St. (near the intersection of Front and Packer Avenue).
- **Hollywood Casino**, PA Gaming Ventures, LLC, 700 Packer Ave.
- **Live! Hotel and Casino**, Stadium Casino, LLC, 900 Packer Ave.

PHL Local Gaming announced after Wednesday's hearing that they have the endorsement of another South Philadelphia community organization, Whitman Council. Representatives of Whitman are expected to testify at Thursday's casino hearing, also to be held at Lincoln Financial Field.

Those who advocate for one of more of the South Philadelphia casinos often list proximity to the sports and entertainment venues as an asset. But Capozzi painted a different picture. Sports fans already spend a lot of time and a heap of money at the events they came to see, she said. They won't have enough of either left to head to a casino afterward, she said. Meanwhile, Capozzi said, everyone else avoids South Philadelphia as much as possible when there's a sporting event or two happening.

Shawn Jalosinski, executive director the Sports Complex Special Services District, said the members of his board representing the four neighborhoods in the district all oppose any casino south of Oregon Avenue, based on concerns about traffic congestion, security, and neighborhood quality of life.

The three sports venues already host a combined 380 annual events, 8 million visitors and 5.5 million vehicle trips each year, he said. “A casino with just 3,000 slots could add an estimated 10- to 11-million vehicle trips,” he said. This would not only greatly increase traffic, but because the casino would operate 24-hours a day, there would be no relief for residents, he said.

Several speakers spoke against awarding a casino license anywhere in the city – including The Innovation Group's Thomas Zitt, a consultant for SugarHouse, the city's existing casino.

One of the other proposals is, like SugarHouse, on the Delaware River waterfront: Wynn Philadelphia, Wynn PA, Inc, 2001 Beach St. and 2001-2005 Richmond Street.

The others would be part of Center City: The Provence, Tower Entertainment, 400 N. Broad Street; and Market 8, Market East Associations, 8th and Market streets.

The gaming board has posted information about all the applicants and proposals [here](#).

Zitt said the state gaming act calls for geographically distributing casinos such that they “maximize capital investment and fiscal impact and minimize cannibalization.” Or, in other words, spread out casinos so they aren't chasing the same group of customers.

Pennsylvania's casino revenue has been enviable, he said, but “The Philadelphia area is showing signs of maturation. Even with addition of Valley Forge, total revenue has flattened.” The trends are consistent with the 2011 report the Innovation Group did for the state treasurer, he said.

“As shown in our report for the treasurer, the Commonwealth would gain more by development outside Philadelphia.”

Wednesday's hearing was the third held on the new applicants – the first two were last month at the convention center. The PGCB also held a hearing Tuesday on SugarHouse's revamped expansion proposal.

The “not in South Philly” and “not anywhere” voices were greatly outnumbered by those urging the board to choose one proposal or another for its location, design, or the character of one of the project principals. The sentiments were mostly the same ones expressed at earlier hearings, like this one in April. One new twist: In a letter read into the record, City Council President Darrell Clarke said it might not be appropriate for him to advocate for one proposal over another, so he wouldn't. But then he heaped praise upon developer Bart Blatstein of Tower Investments, saying his other development projects have transformed city neighborhoods.

At all of the hearings, there have been at least a speaker or two who urged the board not to add another gambling venue in Philadelphia because of the risk of increased gambling addiction, crime or other societal problems.

But in the current chapter of the Philadelphia casinos story, large numbers of organized, anti-casino protesters chanting to disrupt meetings, practicing civil disobedience, waving signs, or even speaking at the microphone that was so typical of previous hearings and other casino-related events have not materialized.

That may be changing.

Representatives of a new organization, the No Casino In Our City Coalition, will speak at tomorrow's hearing, which also starts at 9 am in the Red Zone Lounge at Lincoln Financial Field. They will also “announce the launch of their public awareness campaign,” according to a press announcement.

Those scheduled to testify represent organizations familiar to those who followed Philadelphia's earlier casino sagas, which resulted in the opening of SugarHouse and the PGCB's pulling of the second Philadelphia license from Foxwoods – the license that is up for grabs now. The No Casino speakers include: Paul Boni of Stop Predatory Gambling, Thomas Earle of Liberty Resources Inc., Dan Hajdo of Casino-Free Philadelphia, Rev. Robin Hynicka of Arch St. United Methodist Church and Ellen Somekawa of Asian Americans United.

In case you're wondering, the PGCB can decide not to award a license to any of the applicants, even if the currently on-going review of the applicants determines one or more are suitable to, and capable of, operating a casino.

“The law does not obligate them to make the award,” said PGCB spokesman Doug Harbach.

Among many factors, the board will consider each applicant's financial impact on the state's existing casinos, Harbach said. The board could theoretically decide not to award the license “if they felt the addition of another casino would not have any significant new benefit.”

A second license would also not be awarded if the board fails to reach a “qualified majority” agreement on an applicant, Harbach said. “All four legislative appointees and at least one gubernatorial appointee have to agree,” he explained.

While not making a license award is possible, Harbach said the intent of the board is to see a second casino open in Philadelphia. “The board wouldn't be going through this exercise if the intent wasn't to award a license.”