BY FRAN SPIELMAN City Hall Reporter
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Jorge Ramirez, president of the Chicago Federation of Labor, speaks during a news conference in City Hall on Dec. 12, 2012. I John H. White~Sun-Times

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‘Thompson’s folly’

The checkered history of the Thompson Center includes dripping ceilings, malfunctioning elevators and a prominent role in a Hollywood film.

 The 17-story Helmut Jahn-designed building opened in 1985 with a price tag of $172.6 million — more than twice its projected cost.

 In the years after it opened, building engineers struggled with leaks in the building’s roof and sloping glass facade, as well as malfunctioning elevators and air conditioning systems.

 Taking all this into account, and considering that then Gov. Jim Thompson chose the boldest — and perhaps most problematic — of Jahn’s designs for the building, a 1992 Sun-Times editorial referred to the structure as “Thompson’s Folly.”

 The building was featured prominently in the climactic last scenes of the 1986 film “Running Scared,” with Gregory Hines rappelling to safety while actors Billy Crystal and Jimmy Smits engaged in a gun fight.

Mitch Dudek

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Chicago’s most powerful labor leader suggested Monday that a land-based city casino be located at the James R. Thompson Center, state government’s problem-plagued downtown headquarters.

Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce President Jerry Roper was the first to suggest putting a casino on the lower level and first floor of the building that occupies a full city block at Clark and Randolph with hotel rooms on the floors above.

On Monday, Chicago Federation of Labor President Jorge Ramirez added his formidable voice to the idea.

“It allows us to quickly get the casino up and running. It’s also great for transportation, centrally

located and near to the theater district," Ramirez said.

"We've heard concerns that it's too close to City Hall. We get that. But we've gone to great lengths to keep trade shows, conventions and tourism coming in. Indiana is capitalizing off those [cost-saving work rule] changes. We're losing money to Indiana every day this is not addressed."

Mayor Rahm Emanuel refused to weigh in on the suggestion from Ramirez, who has a close working relationship with the mayor.

"Any discussion of a location is premature," said the mayor's communications director, Sarah Hamilton. "But every day we miss means less money available to us to rebuild our schools and create jobs."

Ramirez acknowledged that converting the Thompson Center into a casino would require the state to empty out government employees and shift them to another location.

But he said, "That building has been a problem for the state for years with the heating and air-conditioning. Operations of the building haven't exactly panned out the way they thought it would."

Roper made a similar white-elephant argument when he first raised the idea in October 2011.

At the time, he called the now-28-year-old Thompson Center a "burden to the state" that a casino would remove.

"As old as it is, it's going to have to have a major renovation. Maybe you're better off allowing somebody else to renovate it," Roper said at the time.

When Roper first suggested the idea, Gov. Pat Quinn did not shoot it down.

“Jerry’s a good man. I like him. But we have a lot of things to do before we get to that point. We’ve got to make sure the law is right,” Quinn said at the time.

Asked Monday about the Thompson Center as a potential downtown casino site, Quinn’s spokesperson Brooke Anderson said the governor is singularly focused on pension reform.

“Illinois cannot gamble its way out of our fiscal challenges. A casino on every street corner will not solve the state’s $96 million pension liability. That’s why the governor continues to insist that pension reform be enacted before any expansion of gaming,” Anderson wrote in an email to the Chicago Sun-Times.

On Nov. 30, Quinn and Mayor Rahm Emanuel said they were “very close” to an agreement on a new casino bill that would include the ethics reforms the governor has demanded and earmark 100 percent of the money from a Chicago casino for school construction and modernization.

Quinn then yielded the podium to Emanuel, who agreed, with a caveat.

“Remember, this has been 25 years in the making. But that said, on oversight and the type of issues like that, we are in alignment,” the mayor said then.

Neither the mayor nor the governor would explain how Quinn’s ethics concerns had been resolved.

The governor has demanded a blanket ban on campaign contributions from casino interests, Illinois Gaming Board control over a Chicago casino and more resources and more time for the board to thoroughly vet operators and investors. He also wants strict procurement controls while ruling out slot machines at O’Hare and Midway Airports and at the Illinois State Fair.

Since then, the issue has been kicked over to the spring session along with a host of other controversial issues.

But Ramirez said Monday he expects Chicago's decades-long quest for a casino to come to a successful conclusion this spring. And when it does, he's hoping at least some of the money is devoted to shoring up under-funded city pensions.

"It's a new source of revenue. We shouldn't take anything off the table," he said.

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