

Proposed slots developer's record in Ill.

The \$445 million Rivers Casino opened in a small city northwest of Chicago nearly two years ago. (Daily Herald/BILL ZARS)

With a Chicago billionaire calling at Worcester City Hall to privately pitch his plan for a slots parlor here, and opponents going public on social media, residents may be wondering what to make of the prospect of more than a thousand slot machines blinking and beeping in Kelley Square. ['+unescape\('Slot%20machines%20inside%20Rivers%20Casino%20in%20Des%20Plaines%20C%20Ill.'\)+'](#) (['+unescape\("Daily%20Herald%20FMARK%20WELSH"\)+'](#))

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Worcester politicians just got their first look at Neil G. Bluhm, the politically connected real estate mogul behind the slots proposal, but residents of a small northern Illinois city have been living alongside one of Mr. Bluhm's casinos for nearly two years.

In interviews this past week, officials and residents of Des Plaines shared their thoughts on Mr. Bluhm, chairman of Rush Street Gaming LLC, and the \$445 million Rivers Casino he built in their city northwest of Chicago.

Des Plaines residents said, for starters, Worcester can expect an all-out public relations blitz from Mr. Bluhm. Even critics described him as a persuasive, polished public speaker. His foundation could soon be writing checks to Worcester nonprofits if the host community wooing plays out as it did in Des Plaines, they said.

Whether that speaks to Rush Street Gaming's responsible corporate citizenship or its adeptness at buying good will depends on whom you ask.

"When it comes to public relations promotions, they're the best. They said the right things. They got to the right people. They made a great presentation," said Nick Chiropolos, a former Des Plaines alderman, the equivalent of a city councilor.

The city's acting mayor, Dick Sayad, said the casino has been good for Des Plaines overall. He said many of the concerns voiced during the approval process have turned out to be overblown.

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The population of Des Plaines is about 58,000. It's a mostly middle class place. People there had all the same concerns about gambling likely to come up here. Would a casino attract traffic gridlock or crime? Would gambling suck money away from local businesses? Would problem gambling hurt families in the community?

Des Plaines resident James Blue, for one, thinks the answer to all those questions has turned out to be yes since Rivers Casino opened in July 2011.

"There were lots of promises made by the casino, which have only been partially kept. We were promised a flood of new business to the community. That has not turned out to be the case," Mr. Blue said. "We were concerned, from other casinos, that there was going to have to be a lot of police and paramedic assistance provided there and, sure enough, that has been true."

Des Plaines City Manager Michael Bartholomew, however, has a more favorable view of Rivers Casino, which paid \$10 million in local taxes last year. Those payments, which include food and beverage taxes in addition to the city's cut of state gambling fees, represent nearly 8 percent of the \$127 million municipal budget.

"I don't know that there's been any spike in crime that you would associate with the casino. That's because of diligent enforcement by our police department as well. We're certainly not naive to the fact that those things can happen, but we were prepared," Mr. Bartholomew said.

The police logs printed by local newspapers are sprinkled with reports of arrests at the casino, most often of minors or people on the state's prohibited list trying to get in, but also an occasional leather jacket theft or drunken punch thrown in the cashier line.

"It's a concern to me quite frankly," said Des Plaines Police Chief William Kushner, who previously spent three decades with the Chicago Police Department, including a stint in its organized crime squad.

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The chief said the nature of his concern is not that crime is getting out of hand at the casino, but rather making sure that doesn't happen. Since he took over as the top cop in Des Plaines in September, he reads every police report involving the casino and keeps an eye on the call volume it generates. On average, he said, his officers respond to four calls per day at Rivers Casino.

“Some days we may get 12 calls. Some days we don't get any. The calls tend to be prohibited people coming into the casino or minors with bad IDs. In the past week, probably because of spring break or something, we've had a rash of five or six underage kids trying to get in,” Chief Kushner said.

The “prohibited people” are Illinois residents with gambling addictions who voluntarily signed up to be barred admission to any casino in the state. If people on the list are caught trying to sneak in, they're charged with criminal trespass and hit with a \$500 fine, Mr. Bartholomew said.

The casino floor is patrolled by the company's private security guards and state troopers working for the Illinois Gaming Board. City police patrol the area around the casino, including its parking lots, and pick up anybody arrested inside.

The casino is located at the southern edge of Des Plaines, among a strip of hotels severing the nearby Chicago O'Hare International Airport. The commercial strip is bordered on one side by a highway and on the other by a park.

“We've had a couple of narcotic arrests in the casino parking structure. Nothing major. It's not the French Connection or anything,” Chief Kushner said. “Prostitutes were using the hotels before the casino was built, while it was being built and since it's been built. As far as street walkers, that's not happening. As far as them trying to work the bars in the casino, that's not happening either because the casino is on top of it.”

Des Plaines police handled 1,467 calls at the casino in its first year of operation, while the fire department fielded 232 calls there, mostly medical in nature, according to a report in the Daily Herald newspaper. Rivers Casino later sought state approval to provide its own EMTs to lessen the strain on the city fire department.

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Both police and fire officials began to notice soon after the casino opened that their radios often wouldn't work inside the fortresslike building's steel walls. The city eventually agreed to pay half the cost of a \$49,000 fix that involved adding receivers, amplifiers and antennas inside the casino, according to a Daily Herald story.

Rivers Casino got some unwelcome headlines across the state last March when the state gambling board fined it \$25,000 for marketing to people who signed up for the self-exclusion list. The company admitted authorizing cash advances and issuing player cards to people on the list, many of whom are problem gamblers. State gambling regulators said the fine would have been larger had Rivers Casino not turned itself in when managers realized the mistake.

Mr. Chiropoulos, the former alderman, said he has little doubt that the casino is hurting area families and the city's image in the region.

"It does bring in revenue to the city, no question about it. But, to me, that's not the right way to go," Mr. Chiropoulos said. "The money that's going in there usually comes from people who can't afford to lose it. To me, it's blood money."

In a statement, Rush Street Gaming Chief Executive Greg Carlin expressed pride in the Des Plaines facility. "The casino has paid hundreds of millions in tax revenue to Illinois and Des Plaines and has created over 1,000 new quality jobs. Rivers Casino has been an active and engaged member of the Des Plaines community, partnering on and contributing substantially to local causes."

Several residents said it's not uncommon to see people lined up outside early in the morning waiting for Rivers Casino to open and that its daytime patrons are overwhelmingly senior citizens, contrary to initial fears that it would bring Las Vegas-style boozing and carousing to the neighborhood.

"Every now and then I see somebody going in there that I think, 'Can you really afford this?' But mostly it's just people doing it for a few hours and enjoying themselves," said Barbara Ryan, executive director of the Des Plaines Chamber of Commerce. "For the most part, it's older, conservative people going. People aren't staggering out of there drunk all the time."

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Ms. Ryan believes the casino has been good for some local businesses, including restaurants. Although the casino has a buffet and several restaurants, they occupy the burger joint and fine dining ends of the spectrum, leaving room in the middle for local eateries, she said.

Mr. Bartholomew, the city manager, said the casino has created its own market rather than poaching patrons from businesses in the city.

Others noted that a shuttle bus provided by Rivers Casino picks up visitors from a light rail station that connects Des Plaines to Chicago and drives them straight to the casino's front door, cutting off local business from capitalizing on the influx of visitors to the city.

But there's little disagreement about one constituency that has capitalized on the casino's presence in Des Plaines.

"The casino has done lots of high-profile giving, particularly to benefit education. But when the casino donates money, it's not really a gift. It's an investment by them," said Mr. Blue, who claimed that recipients of the casino's largesse have been asked to write letters of support that the gambling firm used in its lobbying efforts in Springfield, the state capital.

"I guarantee you there will be a blitz there of trying to make the casino look like a good corporate citizen," Mr. Blue said. "Don't buy it."

Behind the press releases trumpeting donations and the smooth talking at public meetings, he said, Mr. Bluhm is a steely negotiator not to be underestimated.

Contact Thomas Caywood at tcaywood@telegram.com . Follow him on Twitter @CaywoodTG

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