

"Secrecy mars casino project" by Foss Forward

Written by Administrator

Saturday, 12 September 2015 21:14 -

Back in the spring of 2014, when upstate municipalities and developers were ramping up their campaigns to win a casino, I wrote a column suggesting that the casino competition had entered a new, shenanigans-filled phase.

At the time, I assumed that the Shenanigans Phase would come to an end when the state Gaming Commission announced the winners.

That was wishful thinking on my part, and I apologize for being so naive.

When it comes to a project as high-profile and weighted with expectation as a casino, the Shenanigans Phase never really ends.

A lack of transparency and forthrightness has characterized the city of Schenectady's approach to the casino design review process from the very beginning.

Rather than make a concerted effort to be open with residents and keep them informed about the gigantic development planned for the old Alco site on Erie Boulevard, the city has gone in a more secretive and troubling direction.

At every step, officials have worked to minimize scrutiny of the project and keep key details regarding the casino's design out of the public eye.

This pattern of behavior reached a whole new level of absurdity last week, when the city refused to provide The Gazette with an updated rendering of the casino pylon — the gigantic sign that will be visible far and wide.

What made this episode particularly bizarre was that the city permitted a reporter to look at the rendering, and to sketch it, but not to take pictures of it. This meant that The Gazette couldn't

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reproduce the renderings for the public, and that people will remain in the dark about what the new pylon design actually looks like.

The silliness is simply a continuation of the Planning Commission's summertime shenanigans concerning the pylon design.

Back in June, The Gazette learned that members of the Planning Commission met secretly with developers and architects in small groups ahead of the commission's regularly scheduled public meeting. Because there were four commissioners at each meeting, the commission was able to avoid the five-member quorum that would have made these small group meetings subject to the state's Open Meetings Law.

The only logical conclusion to the secrecy surrounding the pylon design is that the city doesn't want to involve the public, and we need to ask what officials are so afraid of.

Complaints and opposition? Presumably there would be some — there almost always are. But there wouldn't be enough to derail the overall project, which is all but guaranteed to move forward.

There's also the possibility that more public input and involvement would strengthen the casino project. When the casino's second design — the one that looked like a strip mall — met with an unfavorable public reaction, the developer changed it. This was a positive development, a sign that public opinion matters.

While I'm not a big believer in casinos as an economic development tool, I'd like for the Schenectady casino to succeed — to create jobs, revitalize the waterfront and generate revenue for cash-strapped municipalities. It isn't my goal to be a naysayer, or to badmouth the project.

But these shenanigans leave a bad taste in the mouth.

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They don't shield the project from criticism — they fuel it.

The good news is that there's still time to open up the process and make it as transparent as possible.

Reach Gazette columnist Sara Foss at sfoss@dailygazette.net ..

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