

Rochester casino fight heats up

Written by Administrator
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Rev. Clifford A. Florence Sr., President of Faith Community Alliance and Bishop Willie Davis, administrator of Faith Community Alliance of Greater Rochester meet with Democrat and Chronicle Editorial Board, along with Del Lago Resort and Casino owner Tom Wilmot, Chris Riegle, President and General Manager of Finger Lakes Gaming and Racetrack and Mike Nolan, COO of Western Regional OTB. (Photo: MAX SCHULTE/@maxrocphoto/, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

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Rhetoric is heating up in the debate about whether to build a small-scale casino at Midtown in downtown Rochester.

Developer Thomas Wilmot, who has [pitched his own plan](#) to build a performing arts center at Midtown, indicated Thursday that opponents are prepared to file a lawsuit if the city chooses to pursue a competing proposal from the Seneca Nation of Indians for a combined video slots gaming facility and arts venue.

Wilmot is the owner of the del Lago Resort and Casino being built in Seneca County — a potential competitor.

Meanwhile, a group of African-American pastors sent a letter to Mayor Lovely Warren earlier this month, pressing her for an apology because Warren suggested that they joined an anti-casino coalition to "line their pockets."

In a brief phone interview, Warren stood by [her previous words](#) and called the pastors "crooks" and "false prophets."

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The feud exposed a broader apparent rift between the ministers and Warren, who has described a downtown arts center or casino as potential job creators for city residents who live in poverty. Among the pastors is the Rev. Clifford Florence Sr., president of Faith Community Alliance of Greater Rochester, who said a casino would prey mainly on the poor, and criticized the city for failing to include residents of poor city neighborhoods in a major anti-poverty campaign.



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Del Lago Resort and Casino owner Tom Wilmot, Chris Riegle, President and General Manager of Finger Lakes Gaming and Racetrack and Mike Nolan, COO of Western Regional OTB speaking at the Democrat and Chronicle Editorial Board along with members of the Faith Community Alliance. (Photo: MAX SCHULTE/@maxrocphoto/, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

In the past, Warren has said that community involvement is central to the Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative.

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The casino furor began earlier this month, when the city aired two draft proposals to build a performing arts center on what is now a large vacant lot at Midtown, a central piece of the downtown landscape.

The Senecas' ideas, which the city summarized from discussions with the nation, called for a Class II casino and a 3,000-seat arts venue that the Senecas proposed to build, own and operate. Wilmot submitted a plan to the city for a stand-alone arts center, which would rely on "state funding for construction and renewed and enhanced community commitments," he wrote.

While the Senecas promised jobs downtown, Wilmot teamed up with the owners of Fingers Lakes Gaming and Racetrack and Western Region Off-Track Betting to pitch a plan to bus city residents to jobs at their facilities out of town.

The city has since released a request for proposals from any developer interested in the Midtown site, with a due date of July 15. An opposition group formed by Wilmot and the other gaming interests called the city's request a "sham" designed to favor the Senecas, hence the hint of possible legal action.

Lobbyist confirms donations offered

Earlier this month, Warren suggested that ministers who spoke on behalf of the anti-casino group, A Better Rochester, had been paid to do so by other gaming interests.

One of those pastors, the Rev. Marlowe Washington, said earlier this month that Delaware North, which owns Finger Lakes Gaming and Racetrack, had indeed offered donations to churches, but not individual pastors. He said that no money had actually changed hands.

Robert Scott Gaddy, a lobbyist working for A Better Rochester, said Thursday that it was he who offered the donations, simply to help the churches with their facilities.

Florence shared the Faith Community Alliance letter to Warren during a meeting with the *Demo crat and Chronicle* editorial board on Thursday. In part, it said no one had paid the ministers to speak and that their

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opposition to a downtown casino has been consistent for many years.

"To suggest we have been bribed to take a stand against a downtown casino is offensive and inaccurate," he wrote. "In doing so, you have publicly attacked our character, and we believe you owe us an apology."

Warren said Thursday she would not discuss specifics about casino or arts center proposals, as she does not want to influence the city's ongoing request for proposals. But she said she would not back down from her earlier remarks.

Among many criticisms of the Seneca plan, Shawn Griffin, an attorney working with A Better Rochester, told the *Democrat and Chronicle* editorial board that no agreement or contract between the city and the Senecas could be enforced, as the Senecas are a sovereign nation.

The Senecas have declined to comment further on their proposal.

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