

Alderman Says He ‘Cannot Support’ A Casino At 78 Mega-Development Amid Neighborhood Opposition

Written by Administrator
Monday, 04 April 2022 08:36 -

CHICAGO — Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez (25) wrote in a letter to a powerful colleague this week that he “cannot support” a proposal for a casino to be built as part of “The 78” mega-development brewing in his Near South Side ward, imperiling the proposal’s chances as it competes with two other plans.

Sigcho-Lopez’s support hinges on the backing of the 78 Community Advisory Council, a group made up of neighbors and community leaders who should collectively be considered a “subject matter expert” in the vetting process for any new development along the 62-acre swath being developed by Related Midwest, the alderman wrote in a letter to Ald. Tom Tunney (44) on Monday. Mayor Lori Lightfoot picked Tunney last week to chair a new Committee on the Chicago Casino, which will head up the city’s consideration of the three remaining casino projects.

Related: [Special casino committee won’t have its own budget, won’t be able to bypass Plan Commission](#)

In his letter, Sigcho-Lopez pointed back to a resident survey conducted by the 78 Community Advisory Council that [found overwhelming opposition](#) to the casino plan last month. Of the 378 neighbors polled, 78 percent said they were either “highly unsupportive” or “somewhat unsupportive” of Related’s and Rivers’ casino proposal.

Neighbors said their biggest concerns were that the casino could lead to more crime in the area, declining home values, contribute to heavy traffic and exacerbate problem gambling.

Community members in [Chinatown previously expressed similar concerns](#) .

“At this moment, I cannot support a casino project within the 78 development,” Sigcho-Lopez wrote in his letter. “It is clear that residents of the ward and surrounding areas are not in favor of it.”

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About 12 percent of the survey respondents said they “believe a casino is an appropriate use for a healthy, vibrant riverfront.” Another 75 percent said they do not.

If Related and Rivers want Sigcho-Lopez’s blessing for their plan to move forward in his ward, “they’re going to have to show support” from neighbors in nearby Chinatown, Pilsen and the South Loop, the alderman told *The Daily Line* on Thursday.

“Where is the support coming from?” Sigcho-Lopez said. “It’s their responsibility to find it. And at this point, almost eight out of 10 residents in the area expressed concerns and rejected the proposal of a casino.”

A spokesperson for Related Midwest wrote in a statement Sunday that the 378 survey respondents pale in comparison to “the tens of thousands of residents surrounding The 78 who are supportive of the plan, the 7,000 jobs it will create and the more than \$5B in annual economic impact that will be infused into the neighborhood by the Entertainment District.”

“The Entertainment District at The 78 is much more than a casino—it’s a destination where Chicagoans of all ages and backgrounds can enjoy the city, the river, cultural attractions and a stunning Observation Tower,” the spokesperson wrote. “We look forward to speaking with residents throughout our ongoing engagement process as we create a plan for Chicago’s next great neighborhood together.”

The spokesperson also pointed to statements from Black Men United president Rev. John Harrell and Economic Development Group president Jorge Perez supporting the 78 casino proposal, as well as a [reader poll from Axios Chicago](#) showing support for the proposal.

In his letter, Sigcho-Lopez urged Tunney to expand the scope of the new casino “super-committee” to maximize local feedback from neighbors of all three proposals.

“I feel that this body should engage with existing chambers, civic groups, or social organizations that wards where the two other finalists are proposing their casinos,” Sigcho-Lopez wrote. “To be sure, if we open the door for the ‘78 CAC’ as a potential ‘subject matter expert’ to present to

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this body, it would only be fair to allow for a comparable entity for the other effected wards.”

Leaders of the 78 Community Advisory Council followed up with their own letter to Tunney saying they had “grave concerns” about the potential for local voices to be left out of the city’s vetting process. Sigcho-Lopez was not included among the 34 members of the new committee because he is not already a committee chair, vice chair or president pro-tempore.

“We note that Alderman Sigcho-Lopez is not a member of this Special Committee and we, as stakeholders in the successful development of The 78 are outraged and are compelled to invoke skepticism [emphasis original] with any decision made by this Special Committee that fails to include the specific voice of the Alderman who would shepard [sic] the outcome if The 78 were deemed to be the final selected site for the location of the Casino,” the advisory council leaders wrote in their schedule.

Debbie Liu, co-chair of the advisory council, said in addition to not including Sigcho-Lopez on the committee, it’s frustrating that the city has taken this long to hold community meetings to get feedback from residents.

“At the end of the day, the community is living with it,” said Liu, who grew up in Chinatown. “The casino will outlive all of us, and if we don’t take time to think ... we might actually encounter more problems.”

Liu said she’s especially concerned about the potential detriment to Chinatown, whose residents are already “aggressively” marketed to by Indiana’s casinos.

“I’m really concerned about the route that we are taking,” she said.

As of Friday, Tunney had not penned a response to either letter, according to Bennett Lawson, Tunney’s chief of staff. But the committee chair and his staff “are bundling everything and will share with committee members weekly,” he wrote in an email to *The Daily Line* Friday.

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“There are casino briefings on Monday for Alderm[e]n and the community meetings next week that Chairman Tunney will be attending,” Lawson wrote. “We expect to synthesize the community reactions after those events for the committee as it begins work.”

While support from the local alderman is not technically a pre-requisite for the city to settle on one of the three remaining casino proposals, the unwritten rule of “aldermanic privilege” will likely weigh heavily on the outcome — especially now that a critical piece of the approval process is in the hands of the City Council.

Ald. Sophia King (4), who represents the area where Bally’s proposed a casino development at the McCormick Place Marshalling Yards, vocally opposed the plan. It was cut out of contention earlier this month.

Related: [McCormick Place casino bids fell short on jobs, revenue projections: city analysis](#)

Ald. Pat Dowell (3) has not given a thumbs-up to developer Robert Dunn’s “One Central” mega-development proposed above the Metra Tracks near Museum campus, which would be the backdrop for Hard Rock’s casino proposal.

And while Ald. Walter Burnett (27) has generally spoken supportively of Bally’s proposal for the former Tribune printing facility in River West, neighboring Ald. Brendan Reilly (42) wrote in his latest constituent newsletter on Friday that he has “communicated his serious concerns about the Tribune proposal to members of the Lightfoot Administration.”

Next week, residents around the three proposed casino sites will have the chance to discuss each of the proposals at three separate community meetings 6-8 p.m April 5-7.

In-person attendance will be prioritized for residents in the ZIP codes and then on a first-come, first-serve basis. The meetings will also be live-streamed.

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April 5: Hard Rock at One Central

Harold Washington Library, 400 S. State Street

April 6: Bally’s Tribune

Tribune Publishing Plant, 700 W. Chicago

April 7: Rivers 78

Isadore and Sadie Dorin Forum, 725 W. Roosevelt Road

Read more <https://blockclubchicago.org/2022/04/04/alderman-says-he-cannot-support-a-casino-at-78-mega-development-amid-neighborhood-opposition/>