

Chicago casino sites gain critics on the City Council

Written by Administrator
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With Chicago's three proposed casino sites getting a torrent of opposition from neighbors, alderpersons are increasingly critical of plans in or near their wards.

The latest to weigh in on a casino site was Ald. Pat Dowell (3rd), who Monday issued a statement opposing the Hard Rock casino proposed as part of the One Central development near Soldier Field. Dowell said that while Chicago needs the revenue from a casino, "The devil is in the details" and the One Central site doesn't make the grade.

Dowell, Mayor Lori Lightfoot's handpicked chairperson of the City Council's Budget Committee, said the Hard Rock plan "would be dropped into an existing, well-established family community in the Prairie District of Chicago's South Loop." She said her concerns include density, public safety and the financial projections that underpin the project. "A casino in Chicago is needed and warranted. Just not at One Central," she said in her statement.

In an interview, Dowell was asked why Lightfoot should give her stance more weight than the objections of other alderpersons directly affected by a casino. "I'm not asking for it to be given more weight," she said. "I'm just saying that I'm in opposition to the site at One Central."

Pressed on the primary reason for her opposition, she said, "Pick one. It's in the public statement. I'm not saying anything more about this."

Dowell joins alderpersons who have raised objections to the other casino sites, the Bally's development at the Chicago Tribune printing plant, 777 W. Chicago Ave.; and the Rush Street Gaming plan with Related Midwest for The 78, at Roosevelt Road and Clark Street. Each site had its own community hearing in the first week of April, and each got an onslaught of criticism from people who didn't want gambling close to their homes.

That's been followed by similar dissents from affected alderpersons—Brendan Reilly (42nd) and Brian Hopkins (2

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), for the Bally's site and, for The 78, Byron Sigcho-Lopez (25

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). The only exception is Ald. Walter Burnett Jr., whose 27th

Ward includes the Bally's site. In an interview, Burnett said he's still listening to all sides.

"There are a lot of residents near Bally's that are against it, but there are some silent majorities for it. They're just not speaking out as much," he said. He said many residents in the old Cabrini-Green area want jobs and contracts from the casino.

Sigcho-Lopez said he fears Dowell's statement is part of an orchestrated, wink-and-a-nod attempt to give the mayor political cover to choose The 78 for the casino. He's already accused Lightfoot of "stacking the deck" by creating a special City Council committee to make all decisions related to a casino and filling that committee with members of her hand-picked leadership team.

The mayor's office was unavailable for comment. Lightfoot wants a decision this summer. The Illinois Gaming Board would then review the Chicago casino applicant.

"We have heard from two very influential aldermen. We've heard from Alderman Reilly on the other proposal. Now, we're hearing from Alderwoman Dowell on this other proposal. So the writing is on the wall" for The 78, Sigcho-Lopez said Monday.

Sigcho-Lopez noted that Lightfoot has received more than \$200,000 in campaign contributions from casino magnate Neil Bluhm's daughter Leslie and her sister, Meredith Bluhm-Wolf. Neil Bluhm, head of Rush Street Gaming, is behind the proposal at The 78.

"The relationships that Mayor Lightfoot has with this particular casino operator certainly has our community concerned," Sigcho-Lopez said.

While the Bally's is within Burnett's Near West Side-based ward, the neighbors mostly belong to the downtown wards represented by Reilly and Hopkins. A City Hall report in March that winnowed the casino applicants to three noted that Bally's is promising a \$25 million upfront payment to the city, while the others are promising none.

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The report estimated that with a 500-room hotel, the Bally's could generate \$191.7 million annually for the city, slightly more than the projections for the other sites. It also said Bally's was the only applicant without a casino already near Chicago, and thus had no conflict of interest with other properties.

In an email, Reilly had a message similar to Dowell's: I support a casino, just not in my political backyard. He said he hopes the mayor "gives equal weight and consideration to the concerns expressed by River North, River West and Fulton River District residents as she will to those expressed by the residents of the 3rd and 25th wards. I support the City's efforts to site a casino in Chicago — our public safety pension systems are counting on it."

Reilly said one objective in locating a casino is to provide an economic boost. Dropping it into "one of the city's already-thriving, fastest-growing, high-density, mixed-use neighborhoods would be a wasted economic development opportunity for Chicago," he wrote.

Hopkins said he's against the Bally's site near his ward because of its effect on the already bottlenecked intersection of Chicago Avenue and Halsted Street. "I agree with the neighborhood organizations' points about the traffic challenges, and I haven't seen anything to suggest the developers have an answer yet," he said.

Asked about the other sites, Hopkins said The 78 "has its advantages." The Bluhm proposal with Related Midwest includes a 1,000-foot-tall observation tower that Hopkins said would become a tourist attraction, drawing revenue and attendance separate from the casino.

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