

Consultants hired by Bally's Corp. say the gambling company's temporary casino in the landmark Medinah Temple won't create the River North gridlock that opponents have warned of when it opens next year, but a local alderperson vehemently against the plan dismissed their traffic study as "seriously flawed."

The report commissioned by Bally's — Mayor Lori Lightfoot's pick to launch Chicago's first casino — and released by the city Friday found the often-congested area around the temple at 600 N. Wabash Ave. "should be able to accommodate" an influx of hundreds of gamblers per day.

State regulators are still vetting Bally's application to break ground on their permanent casino earmarked for the site now occupied by the Chicago Tribune's printing plant at Chicago Avenue and Halsted Street, a project that could take several years to complete.

But pending state approval, city officials hope Bally's will start churning out gambling tax revenue as soon as next summer at the temporary Medinah site, slated to have enough slot machines and table games for up to 1,100 people to play at a time.

The study by V3 Companies and Fish Transportation Group was based on snapshots of traffic and parking in the area taken on a Thursday and Friday in May. The consultants estimated the temporary casino will result in 462 new vehicle trips to the neighborhood during weekday rush hours and 516 on Friday nights, the typical peak for casino admission.

About 60% of customers will drive to the temporary casino, with the rest showing up on foot, bicycle or by CTA, the consultants determined.

Medinah doesn't have any on-site parking, but the roughly 5,000-plus spaces in nearby garages are "adequate" to cover the estimated peak demand of about 500 spaces during normal casino operation, the consultants wrote.

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They recommended a valet service based on Ohio Street, along with traffic control aides on duty during peak periods “to keep traffic flowing around the site and limit double parking along the roadways.”

Downtown Ald. Brendan Reilly (42nd), one of the loudest voices against the project, said he's not at all surprised a traffic consultant hand-picked and bankrolled by Bally's would conclude a casino bounded by Ontario, Wabash, Ohio and State would create no additional traffic burden in the already congested neighborhood.

In his 16 years as alderperson, “every single traffic study commissioned in support of a development project” similarly concluded that “traffic will not be negatively impacted,” he noted.

“As far as I'm concerned this study is seriously flawed, overly vague and clearly written for the sole purpose of concluding a casino will work at Medinah Temple. Having read literally hundreds of traffic studies over the years, I can tell you this one is thin gruel and lacks the credibility that an independent analysis would've provided,” he said.

“I fundamentally disagree with the assumptions made by the traffic consultant — from vastly lowballing the number of vehicular trips to the casino and vastly overestimating the number of people who will be dumb enough to take the CTA or walk to this casino with cash in their pockets. The consultant claims to have made its trip projections based on other casinos in similarly dense, heavily built urban environments like Chicago. I find that hard to believe, given there aren't other casinos in cities as large as Chicago.”

Reilly argued the traffic study is further flawed because it's “vague” about recommended valet operations, “shrugs off” ride-share and charter bus traffic and “does not provide accurate projections” for casino trips using either one, though they are “likely how half the visitors will get to the casino.”

“Nobody would be stupid enough to ride the CTA or walk to a casino with cash in hand,” Reilly wrote.

Medinah Temple casino won't create River North traffic nightmare, Bally's says — but opponents skeptical

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As for the report's claim that valet operations will improve traffic conditions, Reilly wrote, "If you can show me one valet in the City of Chicago that has ever 'improved traffic conditions' at a particular location, I've got a bridge to sell you in Brooklyn."

The temporary casino site can't open without approval from the Illinois Gaming Board, which received Bally's application in August. The agency has taken at least a year to review new casino applications for other municipalities.

Read the traffic study:

Read more <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2022/10/1/23380939/ballys-chicago-medinah-temple-river-north-casino>