

SugarHouse says customers want 'more elbow room'

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Calling SugarHouse Casino "ripe for expansion," the gaming hall's general manager told state regulators Tuesday that a plan to scale back a parking garage while enlarging the gambling floor makes more sense than an earlier proposal.

Wendy Hamilton, who has run the waterfront casino on North Delaware Avenue since its 2010 opening, said customers have told her that the casino needs "more elbow room."

"This is a better plan," Hamilton testified in a hearing before the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board in Philadelphia. "This is a smarter plan."

The \$155 million expansion plan would replace a version approved by the gaming board in 2009.

The biggest change would be lowering the profile of a parking garage from 10 to seven stories, and moving it away from Delaware Avenue. The number of parking spaces has been cut by 1,200, to 2,440.

SugarHouse chief executive Greg Carlin said the owners were able to alter the design after buying five acres next door.

The size of the gaming floor would increase 80 percent, to about 90,000 square feet, with the number of slot machines rising from 1,604 to between 1,900 and 2,200. Table games would go from 56 to 80 or 90.

SugarHouse, Hamilton said, would add a poker room and an "Asian gaming center," which would feature table games such as baccarat. She said regional competitors already have such special areas with table games appealing to Asian customers.

The Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board is expected to consider the plan at its May 15 meeting.

If approved, the improvements would take 24 months to complete.

The audience of more than 100 people at the National Constitution Center was packed with employees, members of the building trades, vendors of SugarHouse, and Fishtown neighbors. Most offered enthusiastic endorsements.

One of the few to object to the expansion was Paul Boni, a board member of the advocacy group Stop Predatory Gambling. Boni said the gaming board should not approve the expansion until it can analyze how many of SugarHouse's customers are compulsive gamblers.

"Here's the question: What percent of SugarHouse's revenue comes from problem gamblers?" Boni said. "If you - the regulators - don't know the answer to the question, you should not approve the expansion."

Local politicians lined up to offer their support. City Councilman Mark Squilla, whose district includes the casino, said he was "very impressed with how SugarHouse has conducted itself as a corporate citizen."

Since opening, the company has donated \$1.68 million to the Penn Treaty Special Services District and will double its annual contribution to \$1 million after the expansion.

Katherine Rhoads, a Fishtown resident, commended SugarHouse for being "the neighbor they promised to be."

SugarHouse sponsors the Mummers Parade and underwrites the New Year's Eve fireworks over the Delaware River.

The casino has generated almost \$300 million in tax revenue.