

Community splits over casino cash

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IT'S NOT UNUSUAL for a casino developer to negotiate a benefits agreement with its neighbors once the casino's license is granted - in 2008, two years *after* they were awarded the first-ever casino license in Philadelphia, owners of Fishtown's SugarHouse Casino signed one.

But Bart Blatstein's Tower Entertainment - which wants to open Provence Casino at Broad and Callowhill streets - has been trying to get an agreement with its neighbors signed, sealed and delivered weeks *before* the license process is complete.

Casino opponents call the move an attempt to show the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board that the community, including a new Mormon Church, does not oppose the casino, and perhaps to stifle potential foes.

Tower and four other applicants seeking the city's second casino license will appear before the gaming board over several days, beginning Jan. 28, in suitability hearings.

That's when applicants will make their cases for the license, with witnesses and documents subject to cross-examination by the gaming board.

Tower's draft neighborhood-development agreement, obtained by the *Daily News*, promises such basic things as clearing trash and construction debris and paying up to \$450,000 a year to a neighborhood-revitalization fund.

It also pledged to pay the North Broad Community Coalition \$90,000 to cover legal fees for Kevin Greenberg, the lawyer hired by the coalition to look out for the neighborhood's interests.

The casino ownership's contributions to the neighborhood-development fund have a caveat, however: They are contingent upon Tower being awarded an unappealed casino license by the state.

The agreement would pay \$300,000 a year for the first five years starting 30 days after gambling begins. After five years, the casino's contribution would bump up to \$450,000 a year.

The proposed Provence project would stretch from Broad and Callowhill west to 17th Street, and would have an immediate impact on the Callowhill, Logan Square and Spring Garden neighborhoods.

In exchange for Tower's donations, the agreement requires that the community take a "non-opposition" stance to the casino.

A sticking point

One critic, Philip Browndeis, who owns a condo a few blocks away from the project, said, "My main concern is that in this agreement, Bart Blatstein will [indirectly] pay Kevin Greenberg [who is supposed to be representing the neighborhood residents] \$90,000 when his same law firm is representing the Isle of Capri, the company that will operate the [Provence] casino."

"It is clear that Blatstein bought the silence of the neighborhood for \$90,000," Browndeis said.

Greenberg, the coalition's lawyer, declined to comment, saying the agreement isn't final.

In the agreement, Tower agrees to pay the coalition's legal fees seven days after it is signed, whether or not the Provence is awarded the license.

The other contributions, though, won't be paid unless Tower wins the license.

Tower Entertainment chose the Isle of Capri after Greenberg had already started working with the North Broad Community Coalition to address neighbors' concerns about safety and traffic.

Last March, Greenberg told the *Daily News* that the law firm had established a "firewall" so that the competing interests of the community would not be affected by another member of the firm representing the casino operator.

Three member organizations of the coalition have already spoken out against the casino. That happened at a hearing in Harrisburg last week. The three have filed petitions to intervene in the gaming board's decision.

The organizations - Rodeph Shalom Synagogue, the Mathematics, Civics and Sciences Charter School and Friends Select School - are all within 1,500 feet of the proposed casino.

"While North Broad Community Coalition, as a coalition, may choose to sign the agreement, we, Rodeph Shalom, continue to believe that this casino should not be in a residential urban neighborhood surrounded by schools and religious institutions," said Dena R. Herrin, president of Rodeph Shalom.

"The impact on traffic would be absolutely so terrible and ultimately serve as a deterrent to visiting the casino or anywhere else in our neighborhood."

The community groups within the coalition are in the process of deciding whether to buy into the proposed agreement. Sources said the coalition leadership is to vote it up or down by Jan. 23, only five days before the Jan. 28 suitability hearing.

Anti-casino critics say the community groups are being pressured to sign the agreement too quickly.

"The casino is using the neighborhood for public-relations purposes and to help it get its license," said Paul Boni, a local board member of the national advocacy group Stop Predatory Gambling.

"All casino developers offer the same sort of bribe to stem opposition," added Dan Hajdo, a board member of Casino-Free Philadelphia. "Along with the politicians, they tell community groups, 'Don't be active. Don't participate in government. Don't try to oppose this.' There's the sense that [the organizations should] just give up and take what you can get."

Not so, says Blatstein spokesman Frank Keel.

"The imminent signing of a Community Benefit Agreement with our surrounding neighborhoods has nothing to do with publicity and everything to do with being a responsible developer and neighbor," he said.

As for the critics, Keel said, "The reality is that there are some individual entities whose members are morally opposed to gambling and there's nothing we can do about it. We also wonder if some members of the few opposing entities might somehow be aligned with another casino applicant."

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