

Gary mayor hopes to finally revive her struggling city

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Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson doesn't want to gamble Gary's future only on casinos. The city's first woman mayor also wants to diversify the troubled city's economy.

She'd like to see Gary become a transportation center, making better use of its truck terminals, new airport and potential port development on Lake Michigan.

Residents elsewhere in Indiana residents may not care much about Gary's fate. Yet if one part of the state suffers, and Gary has suffered for years, so will the rest.

Freeman-Wilson is supporting legislation in the General Assembly that would allow a local option income tax for economic development and pave the way for a teaching hospital and trauma center in Gary. The bill sailed through the Senate on a 50-0 vote.

"We don't have the luxury of doing one thing at a time," Freeman-Wilson said during a recent visit to the General Assembly. "Casinos represent a short-term revenue stream. It will continue to decline. We saw what happened with steel when we put all our eggs in one basket."

After the steel industry's decline, casinos became the hope for Gary. After riverboat gambling was adopted by the General Assembly in 1993, city leaders were able to use casino revenue for amateur sports initiatives, including a baseball stadium and basketball arena in the city's convention center. But the Gary South Shore Railcats in baseball and Gary Steelheads in basketball never attracted a strong fan base or prompted additional economic development.

Twenty years after the first casino opened on Gary's lake shore the city is as sad and desolate as ever.

Now casino revenues are declining. And Freeman-Wilson isn't staking the city's future on proposals to move a casino from the lake to an interstate highway exit that might attract more customers.

A fellow Democrat, former gubernatorial candidate and former Indiana House Speaker John Gregg, thinks Freeman-Wilson is on the right track. "The Gary area has all the potential to grow, with the ports, the east-west and north-south rail lines, the proximity to Chicago," he said. "I saw Republicans and Democrats pulling together in that region to take advantage of these opportunities."

One year into her new assignment, Freeman-Wilson says she isn't thinking about higher office. She tried unsuccessfully for the mayor's office in 2003 and 2007 and was the Indiana attorney general in 2000 by appointment, losing the next election to Republican Steve Carter.

The Indiana Democratic Party's bench of potential statewide candidates is thin for now. If Freeman-Wilson can make Gary shine, an admittedly enormous task, she would almost certainly land on any short lists for state or congressional offices.