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Brockton casino seen from wildly different economic viewpoints

By Joseph Markman

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BROCKTON – As a series of public meetings on the Brockton casino got underway this week, competing visions emerged about how it might affect the city’s economy.

In one version, the \$650 million resort casino – proposed for the Brockton Fairgrounds – would act as a magnet for visitors, who would take advantage of its gaming and entertainment offerings and then also sample a burgeoning downtown scene.

In the other, thousands of slot machines and table games would drain resources from poor and middle-class residents and shift that money to wealthy developers as part of a government-sanctioned system “rigged against the average guy.”

The first argument is being made by the Brockton 21st Century Corp., a publicly funded economic agency that works with city officials to attract businesses to Brockton. Its board of directors voted to support the casino Tuesday, ahead of a May 12 binding referendum on the project.

“It changes everything. Instead of Brockton as the city that people drive through, it becomes the city that people drive to,” said Michael Gallerani, B21’s executive director. “It’s a game-changer for the city of Brockton.”

The second argument comes from Les Bernal, a former top aide in the Massachusetts legislature and now the national director of the non-profit Stop Predatory Gambling. Bernal was scheduled to be the guest speaker Tuesday night at Trinity Baptist Church, where a group of church leaders opposed to the casino organized a public forum.

“Casinos produce one thing, and that’s inequality,” Bernal said in an interview Tuesday afternoon. “They are dishonest and they extract money from low- and middle-income people and transfer it to a very wealthy, privileged few.”

Brockton is quickly becoming the state’s latest casino battleground.

The city is vying for the third and final Massachusetts casino license with Somerset and New Bedford. Projects proposed for both of those communities, however, are further behind Brockton in the process and have not scheduled referendums.

State officials will ultimately decide which, if any, project is issued a license. The Massachusetts Gaming Commission is partway through its licensing process for this region. Voters in each community must approve their casino proposal for the projects to move forward.

Brockton officials have so far welcomed the city's casino proposal and its promised 1,500 permanent jobs, \$10 million in annual revenue and other benefits. The casino would include a 240,000-square-foot gaming facility, 225-room hotel and event and entertainment space.

A public meeting hosted by three city councilors, featuring the developer, is scheduled for 7 p.m., Thursday at West Middle School. There is also a business-focused meeting at the Shaw's Center at 4 p.m., Wednesday.

John Merian, chairman of B21's board of directors, said the board supports the casino, in part, because as federal and state funding proves increasingly elusive, cities like Brockton must seek out alternative forms of revenue and economic stimulus.

He added that the casino would complement the \$180 million worth of development happening downtown, and the city's ongoing efforts to attract more residential and commercial growth.

"We're trying to find solutions to make our community competitive in the 21st century and make it a place people want to come because they had a good experience," Merian said.

Bernal and other opponents focus on what they call the flawed financial promises of regional casinos. They lean on academic studies that show that casinos often lower property values and attract local, lower-income customers rather than tourists.

"Ultimately, it's phony prosperity, it's not real," Bernal said. "It's hard to reform our schools and do what it takes to educate people. It's a whole lot easier to come up with fanciful ideas of how a casino is going to affect our cities."