

City Prepares for Foxwoods Hearing

Contributed by Caryn Hunt
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Some of the controversy surrounding the downtown Market East Gallery site Foxwoods is considering for relocation of its project was addressed at a Society Hill Civic Association-sponsored forum Tuesday night. First District Councilman Frank DiCicco told the crowd that the City was committed to an honest, thorough look at the site through a Plan of Development process. Deputy Mayor for Planning Andrew Altman supported this commitment on behalf of Mayor Nutter's administration. He described the motion by Foxwoods to consider this location as "uncharted territory" and an action that set in motion an orderly Plan of Development process, beginning with the zoning designation introduced by DiCicco. The process, he said, will involve meaningful public input and dissemination of information.

DiCicco introduced the Commercial Entertainment District (CED) zoning legislation on behalf of Foxwoods because, he said, he'd learned from the past two years that thwarting their progress, even as part of a process of due diligence, only resulted in the State and the State Supreme Court wresting more control over permitting. "Decisions were being made that effect my constituents and I was not helping because I wasn't in that room," he said, "When I'm not in the room, you're not in the room."

In 14 cases brought before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to challenge gaming and in particular the two Philadelphia projects licensed by the State Gaming Control Board, the Court has ruled in favor of the casinos. All local Philadelphia elected officials support a resiting process, of which this is the first exercise although it puts the proposed site in another densely packed residential area of the city. Governor Ed Rendell has steadfastly supported the casino operators despite sustained opposition by thousands of Philadelphia residents to slots parlors in their neighborhoods. Act 71, passed in 2004, mandated two casinos be built in Philadelphia. The Gaming Control Board issued provisional licenses to SugarHouse and Foxwoods in December 2006, with locations on the waterfront, but intense local opposition has delayed their construction.

Helen Gym, representing Asian Americans United, pointed out that Chinatown, the community which would be most impacted, is not only a unique residence within the city, but in the country, as nationally Chinatowns are becoming overdeveloped. She said her neighborhood was "no less hopeful and rich than other communities" and pointed out that in the process of evaluating the casino projects, "the city has put \$70 million in revenue on the books, and \$0 in costs". Economist Robert Goodman, well-known for *The Luck Business*, an analysis of the economic impact of gaming on communities, asked politicians to look carefully at economic impacts to what is already a promising and growing "creative economy" in Philadelphia, according to a 2007 report by Econsult .

Stop Predatory Gambling Executive Director Les Bernal emphasized the particular risks associated with slots gambling. He said casinos derive 80% of their revenues from slot machines and they are engineered to entice players to, in industry parlance, "play to extinction". Bankruptcy, fraud and suicide are some of the ways problem gambling impacts people and their families. DiCicco and Altman each declined to speak to social impacts related to gambling, which according to a study prepared for Sullivan County, New York also include a rise in theft, prostitution, and drug and alcohol related crime.

Altman reiterated that the CED hearing beginning 10AM November 1st in City Hall was just the beginning of a process in which all these issues- traffic, economic and social impacts- will be looked at and addressed, and where the opportunities to redevelop Market East will also be considered.