

ATLANTIC CITY - Mayor Lorenzo Langford tentatively endorsed a proposal by Senate Democrats to have a state development agency oversee planning and zoning in Atlantic City's casino zone.

The proposal, part of a package of legislation designed to revitalize the resort's slumping casino and tourism

industries, would greatly expand the powers of the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority.

Langford, who as mayor represents Atlantic City on the CRDA's 17-member board, said he would need to scrutinize the plan before making a final decision.

"Conceptually, I don't have a problem with it. But the devil's in the details," he said.

James B. Kehoe, chairman of the CRDA board, enthusiastically embraced the plan. He characterized it as a vote of confidence in the agency's planning and management abilities.

"As chairman, I think it's a great idea," Kehoe said. "What we do can only provide greater services for the city and the casino industry."

Langford and Kehoe commented on the plan in separate interviews with The Press of Atlantic City before and after the CRDA's monthly board meeting Tuesday. Board members did not discuss the plan during the meeting itself.

The CRDA, funded by Atlantic City's 11 casinos, has 31 employees and a \$4.5 million annual operating budget. Separate from its operating budget, it finances housing projects and economic development throughout New Jersey using a 1.25 percent tax on annual gross gaming revenue.

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 19 October 2010 18:47 -

CRDA Executive Director Thomas D. Carver noted that any role the authority will have in the city's zoning and planning process depends on a final vote by the Legislature and approval from Gov. Chris Christie.

"Who can predict what will happen in the legislative process?" Carver said. "I assume there will be a lot more debate on this plan. It's not a given."

Carver added, though, that the legislation suggests that state lawmakers "have great faith in this organization."

"Our goal and mission will not change. We are determined to make this city the best place it can possibly be," he said.

Councilman Dennis Mason, who is employed by the CRDA as its facilities manager, predicted that City Council would back the Democratic plan. In particular, Mason likes the idea of creating a partnership between the casinos and the Atlantic City Convention & Visitors Authority to promote the city.

"What's to resist?" Mason said. "It makes sense."

On Monday, Senate Democrats proposed expanding the CRDA's powers under a legislative package that they hope will revive the casinos and New Jersey's horse-racing industry. The main parts of the plan call for legalizing in-state Internet wagering at the casinos and allowing the voters to approve sports betting in New Jersey if a federal ban is lifted.

Lawmakers have been debating ways to carry out the recommendations of a governor's task force released this past summer. One key recommendation is the creation of a state-controlled tourism district to oversee Atlantic City's casino zones. The tourism district would clean up blight and tackle crime to make the city safer and more attractive for tourists.

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In outlining their plan, the Senate Democrats said the CRDA would be reorganized to "give it zoning and planning authority over Atlantic City's casino district and allow the agency to play a more significant role in the resort's management."

Their statement added that the CRDA would also have "greater oversight and investment in tourism and policing to ensure a clean and safe environment."

CRDA officials were trying to figure out Tuesday whether that meant the Democrats want the authority to serve as the oversight body for the proposed state-run tourism district.

Kehoe suggested that at the very least, the CRDA could help coordinate discussions among the Legislature, the city and the Governor's Office on the plan.

"There's got to be a linchpin. I think it could very well be the CRDA," he said.

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