

Midtown casino? City may take that gamble

Written by Administrator
Thursday, 14 April 2016 19:45 -



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Signs like this could be coming to downtown Rochester. (Photo: File photo) [Buy Photo](#)

A combined casino and performing arts center at Midtown is under consideration by the city, and the local developer behind the idea is optimistic a proposal could be firmed up in the next month or two.

"The bottom line is we'd have a casino downtown, we would have a performing arts center, and it would be at no cost to the city of Rochester," developer Robert Morgan said Thursday.

Instead, the Seneca Nation of Indians would foot the bill for the four- or five-story combined facility on the central parcel of the East Main Street site.

What exists now, as far as plans, is something along the lines of pencil sketches, Morgan said, but with detail. A 3,000-seat theater would be on the upper floors, with a casino on the first two and parking for 1,700 cars beneath. Morgan put the price tag between \$70 million and \$100 million. The Senecas would own and operate the performing arts center, in consultation with the city.

Mayor Lovely Warren confirmed that the city has been evaluating the idea for several months now, but downplayed any immediacy.

"It's something I am going to do a lot of research on," she said, "before I make a decision either way."

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Seneca President Maurice A. John Sr. declined comment, through a spokesman.

Talk of a downtown casino has been around for at least a decade.

Mall magnate Thomas Wilmot had been working with the Seneca-Cayuga Tribe of Oklahoma for a downtown casino at the Sibley Building in 2004, but the deal faltered.

When residents were asked their opinion of a casino in the city back in a 2011 Voice of the Voter poll, they were split with 50 percent in favor, 48 percent opposed, and the rest undecided. In 2014, as the Senecas pitch for a Henrietta casino collapsed, another Voice of the Voter poll gauged support for a casino anywhere in Monroe County, and the numbers shifted to 39 percent in favor, 52 percent opposed and 9 percent unsure.

It was about that time that rumors of something downtown began to build.

While opinions may be changing, so, too, is downtown.

Office towers immediately surrounding the lot in question are being renovated for housing and could [add more than 650 units in the coming years](#) , representing a 20 percent increase in the downtown housing stock. Morgan is involved in the residential component of Tower280, the former Midtown Tower, adjacent to the center parcel in question. He also is involved in developments in Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Buffalo, he said — all cities with downtown casinos.

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