

Donald Trump's 1997 bid for Detroit casino showed off campaign style

Written by Administrator
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Donald Trump laughs as his casino venture partner Mel Farr, right, drapes a cape over his shoulders at a press conference in the lobby of the Fisher Theater in 1997. Farr often wore the signature cape in the TV commercials he did for his auto dealerships. (Photo: Craig Porter, Detroit Free Press)

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Detroit almost became an outpost in Donald Trump's casino and hotel empire two decades ago when he proposed building a half-billion-dollar facility with a Motown theme and promises of millions for blight removal.

His \$542-million plan -- the Trump Motor City Hotel Casino -- was among 11 proposals in competition in 1997 for one of three licenses up for grabs.

Trump's bid lost in the next-to-last round. But the failed campaign showed all the same earmarks -- showmanship, theatrics, grandiose statements -- on national display today in his quest for the White House. Despite losing the bid, Trump did make good on a pledge to help pay for a group of talented Detroit high school students to play at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

For the casino bid, Trump teamed up with Mel Farr, the former Detroit Lions running back and flamboyant car dealer. Trump also forged an exclusive partnership with the Motown Museum for the casino's theme. At a news conference in the Fisher Theatre, Trump said his casino would be the biggest in the world and "very expensive."

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The casino complex was to have a "Motor City Walk" and include retail, convention and sports facilities. The 800-room hotel would be topped with a giant rotating sphere symbolizing a hood ornament. Possible locations were Grand Circus Park or the riverfront.

"Knowing how to build and knowing what to build -- that's something I do very well," Trump said in the summary document of his proposal.

He vowed to bring his Miss Universe pageant to Detroit every three years if his proposal won and pledged a community benefits package with \$14 million for demolishing blighted houses and structures across the city -- an effort years ahead of its time.

Farr, who died last year at 70, was a 5% equity partner. Farr was hesitant at first to team up, suspecting his involvement was merely one of convenience so Trump might have a local edge. Three times he turned down Trump's appeals, "but Trump kept calling back," according to the book "Titans of the B.E. 100s: Black CEOs Who Redefined and Conquered American Business."

Farr eventually was persuaded by Trump's insistence that the proposal was not just a casino but also the redevelopment of Detroit.

Detroit real estate investor Herb Strather, who was involved in a competing casino proposal, recalled last week how Farr told him he had never actually met Trump in person before he arrived in Detroit for the official unveiling of their joint plan.

"It was the first time Mel Farr had ever seen Donald Trump, and Donald Trump got up at the mic and was talking about his longtime friend for 25 years," Strather said. "Mel was shocked -- he didn't know whether to say yes or no or what. He was totally unprepared for it, but that's Donald Trump."

A Farr relative did not respond to a message seeking comment. A Michigan representative for the Trump presidential campaign also did not return messages for this article.

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'Bad impression'

Today Trump's casino push is long-ago history, another "what could have been" for the city's landscape, along with [a second and third Fisher Building](#) and [police headquarters](#) in Michigan Central Station.

For some Detroit officials, the city's decision to reject Trump's casino bid for financial shortcomings was the right one considering the debt troubles that later plagued his entertainment corporation, then called Trump Hotels & Casino Resorts, which filed for bankruptcy in 2004, 2009 and again in 2014.

"Detroit did dodge a bullet," said C. Beth DunCombe, a former CEO of the Detroit Economic Growth Corp. who was involved in vetting the different casino proposals.

DunCombe also was the sister-in-law of Detroit's mayor at the time, Dennis Archer, who ultimately picked the winning three finalists. "What happened to Trump tells you why we did not do junk bond deals," she said.

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Tough competition

The competition for a Detroit license got under way the following year and attracted well-known casino developers and local investor partners.

The field featured casino mogul Steve Wynn and his Mirage Resorts; an investment group with former Detroit Mayor Coleman Young; a coalition of 139 investors including Strather, Marian Ilitch and Circus Circus Enterprises; and a proposal from businessman Don Barden that was backed by pop star Michael Jackson and involved a \$1-billion theme park to be called [the Majestic Kingdom](#).

The Barden-Jackson proposal included a plan complete with roller coasters, a monorail and "800-room mansion in the sky."

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"Everybody and their brother was making proposals," joked Tom Shields, president of the MRG public relations firm in Lansing, who handled publicity for the proposal that evolved into today's MotorCity Casino Hotel. "You have to remember that back at that time, commercial gaming was very limited" across the country.

Trump's casino empire was mostly an Atlantic City phenomenon, although the year before he had opened a riverboat casino in Gary, Ind. And in 1986, Trump famously joined Detroit's Mayor Young for a helicopter tour across Detroit, giving particular attention to the former Uniroyal site on Jefferson near Belle Isle. "Because of Mayor Young, I think Detroit is ready for a fantastic renaissance," the real estate mogul told reporters after landing.

Although no development deals ever came from Trump's tour, it did fuel years of rumors and speculation in Detroit.

When Trump turned his attention back to the city for his 1997 casino bid, he hired Young's former press secretary, Bob Berg, for his plan's publicity team.

Berg recalled how he first checked with his old boss before joining up with Trump. Young, by then out of office, was part of a competing casino group dubbed Paradise Valley.

"He basically said 'I can't afford to pay you what Donald Trump can, so go ahead,' " Berg said.

Shortly before Archer chose the three winners of the licenses, a public opinion poll by the Free Press found Trump's proposal as the top choice of all the entries. Berg was quoted attributing that victory to several factors, foremost "the Trump name."

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Win some, lose some

Trump didn't seem to dwell on his Detroit loss. He soon told Free Press columnist Mitch Albom that "You win some, you lose some. I got so many other casino deals I can't even keep track."

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