

List of five sites not final; other locations possible for Chicago casino, Lightfoot said — even downtown

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Don't get "fixated" on five South and West Side sites for a Chicago casino because the list is "not definitive," Mayor Lori Lightfoot said Thursday, refusing to rule out a downtown site.

Lightfoot said she excluded downtown sites from the list that will be the subject of a feasibility study by a consultant hired by the Illinois Gaming Board because of opposition from the convention and tourism industries.

"I'm not saying a downtown site is off the boards. ... This is not the definitive list. We'll form that later," the mayor said.

"But there's some concern about whether or not having a downtown site will detract from tourism. There are some tour operators and conventions that don't want a downtown site because they feel like their conventioners will go to the casino and not actually participate in the conventions. Rather than deal with that noise now — it'll have to be dealt with down the road — we just took other sites," primarily city controlled.

For weeks, Lightfoot refused to discuss specific sites for the Chicago casino that has eluded her predecessors for decades. She said she would await results of the feasibility study.

That all changed this week when City Hall put its cards on the table, disclosing that five South and West Side sites would be studied for their ability to get financing:

- Near the Harborside International Golf Center site at 111th and the Bishop Ford Freeway.
- The former Michael Reese Hospital, at 31st and Cottage Grove.
- Pershing Road and State Street.

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- Roosevelt Road and Kostner Avenue.

- The former U.S. Steel parcel at 80th Street and Lake Shore Drive.

Local aldermen were blind-sided by the mayor's list; two declared their opposition to sites in their wards.

Ald. Sophia King (4th) said plunking down a casino at the Reese site in historic Bronzeville — purchased by the city for an Olympic Village that was never built — was “appalling and offensive”, comparing it to “putting a casino in Harlem.”

Ald. Pat Dowell (3rd) likewise opposed the Pershing/State site in her ward. Dowell said she already has a commitment from Pete's Fresh Market and that a grocery store is “exactly what my community needs at this location.”

Lightfoot was highly-critical of Emanuel's dictatorial, top-down management style. She has promised to be more collaborative before making decisions on major projects.

That's apparently why she went out of her way to promise a “robust community engagement process” before the final site for a Chicago casino is chosen.

“We're gonna reach out to people in all 77 neighborhoods to focus on what they'd like to see, what their concerns, what their issues are so that, when we then later come and think about specific sites, we've got that data to inform how we're going to address an eventual RFP that will go out related to a casino,” she said.

“So, the feasibility study is purposely limited. Yes, there are sites there. But, don't get fixated on those because those may or may not be the actual sites.”

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Without saying the words, “I’m sorry,” the mayor all but apologized to aldermen who felt blindsided by her list of sites.

“I’ll own that. ... That’s a mistake. ... The headline should never be, ‘Aldermen surprised.’ That should never happen and, if that happened, that’s a fail on our part. We will own it and we will correct it,” she said.

At least two aldermen, however, were gung-ho about their local sites.

Ald. Susan Sadlowski-Garza (10th) has been beating the drum for the site adjacent to [the Harborside golf courses](#), saying it could capture “everything that leaves for Hammond.”

And Ald. Michael Scott Jr. (24th) has argued it would be “poetic justice” to put a casino on the North Lawndale site at Roosevelt and Kostner site that was an infamous dumping ground for FBI mole John Christopher, star of the federal investigation known as “Operation Silver Shovel.”

But, first things first.

“The primary focus of this study is to determine whether or not the financial structure—particularly the taxing element of it — is feasible. Whether or not we can actually put together a casino that can be financed. Because if we can’t, it’s all for naught and we need to start again,” Lightfoot said.

“If the feasibility study comes back and tells us no matter where you are, you can’t fund and finance this casino because the economics don’t work, then we go again to the General Assembly and work on getting that right first. We have to get the economics right before we talk about specific sites.”

Read more <https://chicago.suntimes.com/city-hall/2019/7/18/20699672/chicago-casino-sites-d>

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