

Springfield hostile to Lightfoot's new Chicago casino plan

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 15 October 2019 14:36 -

Mayor Lori Lightfoot's new plan to revive a proposed Chicago casino by having it [jointly owned by a city-state commission](#) is in danger of floundering in Springfield even before it's formally introduced.

Key lawmakers say the proposal, [unveiled to Chicago legislators in a weekend briefing](#), faces an uphill fight to win passage in the General Assembly's fall veto session, as Lightfoot wants. Gov. J.B. Pritzker is not on board. And the timing of pitching government ownership of a property as vulnerable to malfeasance as a casino is horrid as federal agents continue corruption probes involving influential pols in the House, Senate and Chicago City Council.

"It's problematic," said Sen. Melinda Bush, a Democrat but one from suburbia (Grayslake) who has focused on ethics issues during her years in the Senate. Voting to create a government-owned casino "is really a tough call, given what we've seen lately on ethics issues. I think a lot of people would be reluctant (to back it)."

Sen. Terry Link, D-Waukegan, is the chief sponsor of the bill approved in the spring that authorized new casinos in Chicago and other locations. He told me he potentially could vote for Lightfoot's plan, but doubts most of his colleagues or Pritzker will go along.

"This idea is not new. This was floated in the spring. The governor was adamantly opposed," Link said. "He told me that he did not want city ownership in any regard." Asked if the votes are there to win approval in the fall veto session that begins Oct. 28, Link replied, "I don't think so. I don't think a single Republican would vote for that."

Pritzker's office in a statement neither confirmed nor denied what Link said, but the governor made it clear he has yet to be convinced to support the concept of a government-owned casino.

"The governor remains open to a number of approaches for making the Chicago casino successful, but with regard to public ownership, our administration would need to ensure that the challenges of public ownership are fully understood and addressed," it said.

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Adds the statement, "We understand that a number of lawmakers now have been briefed on these proposals, and we look forward to reviewing them after we are briefed on the details of the proposals."

That latter remark points to another unusual aspect of Team Lightfoot's handling of this matter. In normal Springfield etiquette, mayors brief all the major players, including the governor, before walking back-bench lawmakers through a proposal. In Lightfoot's case, she briefed Chicago lawmakers and, separately, Senate President John Cullerton but not Pritzker, though I'm told the mayor has had some preliminary conversations with the governor.

Under Lightfoot's plan, a commission of two members selected by the mayor and two by the governor would own the casino license, with a fifth member, the chairman, selected by the other four. The state would get 51 percent of the profits, an estimated \$381 million a year, dedicated to paying part of the costs of Pritzker's just-passed \$45 billion capital program. The city would get \$366 million, money that would go to the city's cash-short police and fire pension plans and help Lightfoot plug a big budget hole. The casino would be operated day to day by an outside management firm.

City Hall officials argue that the idea of having a commission—"an independent board"—own the license is different from the actual city-ownership plan that was presented in the spring. In reality, the agency would operate sort of like the Metropolitan Pier & Exposition Authority, which owns and operates McCormick Place and is governed not by the mayor or governor but by a board appointed by them.

But one key lawmaker I spoke with, who asked not to be named, called that structure "a tough sell."

Another official, House Majority Leader Greg Harris, D-Chicago, said he hasn't tried to count votes yet, but "I think people are going to have to think about this. They've got a lot of educating to do."

Lightfoot has an alternate plan, aimed at lowering tax rates of up to 75 percent on a Chicago casino—a level that a state consultant concluded was so high that it would block any private investment.

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Under the terms of the fallback plan, the state and city would lower the tax rate on proceeds from slot machines and split the take 51-49. The city also may be willing to delay certain initial tax payments for both the Chicago casino and new gambling outlets in other cities.

While that might get some support from lawmakers from other cities with casinos, it also risks reopening the entire huge casino bill to amendments.

"If you open that bill, you have everyone put in their hand and try to change what they didn't like the first time," said one lawmaker, referring to favors for other casinos, race tracks, internet gambling and other interests affected by the bill that authorized the Chicago casino.

The veto session is due to run six days over two weeks, Oct. 28-30, and Nov. 12-14. Lightfoot's budget is set to be unveiled on Oct. 23.

Lawmakers did approve plans for a Chicago-owned casino once before, in 2012, as part of a wide-ranging gambling expansion package and not as a stand-alone bill. The measure was [vetoed](#) by then-Gov. Pat Quinn, who said he worried about ethical flaws in the bill that would provide "loopholes for mobsters."

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