

Chicago casino: Developers urge Mayor Lori Lightfoot to go with downtown location

Written by Administrator

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Mayor Lori Lightfoot's office asked casino developers this summer to show at least some of their cards on how — and where — they'd want to break ground on a Chicago casino.

A rundown of responses released by the city Wednesday suggests most developers and other gaming stakeholders agree on at least one thing: It should go downtown.

Eleven groups submitted responses to the nonbinding request for information that Lightfoot's office put out in August, which asked for their input on everything from how big the venue should be to how gaming plans might coexist with other city attractions.

Eight of those groups "believe the casino should be located downtown (or near downtown)," according to the mayor's office. Two groups didn't answer the location question, and one group said it should go in the Harborside golf center site on the Southeast Side.

Harborside was among [five potential casino sites](#) Lightfoot floated last summer on the South and West sides, though the mayor has kept a poker face on where she'd like to see the big-city gaming house end up.

She has kept the door open to a downtown location that convention and tourism industry leaders oppose, but which [a state-hired gaming consultant](#) insists is the best bet to maximize tax revenue earmarked for the city's depleted police and firefighter pension funds.

Lightfoot said in a statement the RFI responses "are indicative of the excitement and anticipation of this once-in-a-lifetime project. Thanks to the responses of nearly a dozen RFI respondents, we are not only one step closer to bringing the long-awaited Chicago casino to life but have the critical information we need to ensure this project will be a success."

Four of the 11 responses received by the city came from major casino developers: Hard Rock, MGM Resorts, Wynn Resorts and Related Midwest in partnership with Rush Street Gaming, the company chaired by Chicago billionaire and Rivers Casino Des Plaines magnate Neil Bluhm.

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Four responses came from real estate developers D3 Realty, Development Management Associates, JDL and R2 Companies.

One response each came from casino financier MGM Growth Properties, casino feasibility consultant Christiansen Capital Advisors and the Chicago Neighborhood Initiative.

The mayor's office previously denied an open records request for copies of their responses, arguing that releasing them "would frustrate procurement or give an advantage" to one developer over another, though the responses are not formal proposals.

The city says it expects to solicit actual bids early next year "depending upon the pandemic and its impact on capital markets for new development projects at that time." Lightfoot's office noted the 11 respondents "agreed that the current COVID-19 pandemic will have no or minimal impact on the finally constructed casino facility given the timeline for selecting and licensing a casino operator and construction of the casino complex."

The state gambling expansion signed into law by Gov. J.B. Pritzker last summer that authorized the Chicago mega-casino allows for the developer to set up shop at a temporary site while a permanent gaming house is built. Six respondents agreed a temporary site should be set up at an existing site downtown while three respondents said it would be too costly.

Among the key factors in selecting a permanent site, according to the respondents, are adequate parking, "premier visibility," proximity to city amenities, the "ability to leverage the Chicago riverfront," "neighborhood acceptance" and economic development — though that shouldn't be the "key driver of location."

Respondents were split on who should choose where to break ground. Among the casino developers, one said the city should narrow it down to a few potential sites, one said the operators should select it themselves, and two suggested a collaborative approach with the city suggesting sites but allowing for others.

The casino developers said they'd need between 10 and 25 acres to build a complex that would

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include a hotel, food and beverage outlets, event space, stores and parking.

The mayor's office noted respondents "were also in alignment that community engagement and support of the casino were integral to its success."

Lightfoot has pledged there will be "a robust community engagement process," including a series of public meetings to gather residents' input on the location.

Read the city's overview of casino RFI responses:

Read more <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/12/2/22065364/chicago-casino-downtown-location-lightfoot-rivers-mgm-hard-rock-wynn>