

Like most cities, Richmond loves big shiny new projects because they symbolize progress.

Through the years, such projects locally have captured the public's attention and support. Among them, the proposed \$1.2 billion Richmond Coliseum and Downtown development project; the Washington Football Team training camp; and now a Richmond casino.

While we like big shiny projects, too, the Free Press signals our support if, only after careful examination, the project makes sense.

Urban One's planned \$565 million ONE Casino + Resort makes sense. And we urge Richmond voters to vote 'yes' on the casino question on the Nov. 2 ballot.

Why?

Unlike the proposed Coliseum project, which we scrutinized and rejected, Urban One's casino plan doesn't put taxpayer money at risk. No taxpayer money will be on the line as the Black-owned media giant works to open by late 2024 this 100-acre luxury facility that will feature 100,000 square feet of gaming space; a 250-room, 4-star hotel with 15 restaurants and bars; a 3,000-seat theater that will have live performances; a television and radio studio, where entertainers can be interviewed and programs can be produced; a soundstage to lure film and other productions from the current mecca in Atlanta to Richmond; and a 20-acre greenspace with a festival space for events, an arboretum and bike and fitness trails.

So who will pay for all of this?

Private investors.

Unlike the proposed Coliseum and Downtown development project—which the Free Press

rejected because of its likely drain on Richmond taxpayers and city coffers—Richmond taxpayers aren't being asked to pay for the ONE Casino + Resort project over the next 30 years with a portion of their real estate tax dollars.

Instead, ONE Casino + Resort would rely totally on private investment. The list of well-heeled investors, a veritable Who's Who in Black Richmond available on the project's website, are the ones who will — and can afford to—bear the financial risk. Richmond taxpayers wouldn't be left holding the bag.

And if Urban One's projections are correct — and we hope they are — the casino-resort project stands to attract visitors from up and down the East Coast and would pump \$500 million in tax revenue into the city over the first 10 years. That money could be used for education, vital police, fire and social services and other essential needs in the city.

We have been disappointed before with bright, shiny projects such as the Washington Football Team training facility that didn't meet the expectations or touted financial projections of developers and Richmond taxpayers were left picking up a multimillion-dollar tab.

We don't believe that would happen with ONE Casino + Resort because, in part, of the business acumen and experience of Alfred C. Liggins III, CEO of Urban One, who is spearheading the project, and his mother, Cathy Hughes, founder and chairperson of Urban One. They have a proven record, building their highly successful media empire from the ground up. Urban One also has a 7 percent stake in the MGM National Harbor casino resort in Maryland and, as such, has experts lined up to make Richmond's ONE Casino + Resort a success.

Above all, we like this project because it is Black-owned and because of the opportunity it affords both people and a South Side community that have long been mired in neglect. This project offers job growth and potential in an area of the city that can use a boost as it raises the economy and fortunes of the city overall.

According to Mr. Liggins, the project will spur 3,000 construction jobs and create an additional 1,500 permanent jobs with an average salary of \$55,000 once the casino is built.

We like this project, too, because Mr. Liggins and Ms. Hughes have made an expressed commitment to having 50 percent of the construction and operational workforce to be diverse, reflecting the unique character of Richmond. They also have committed to having 40 percent of their suppliers be minority-owned businesses and emerging, small businesses.

These commitments are essential in a city where nearly 50 percent of the residents are African-American.

Additionally, 60 percent of the project's workforce, Mr. Liggins said, would be Richmond area residents. That would be a big plus for Richmond area families.

We believe it is important for a Richmond casino to get in the game early before the Virginia market is saturated. More and more communities in Virginia are getting into the gaming-entertainment business.

We believe some of the arguments made by opponents of the casino smack of paternalism and condescension, as critics claim they are trying to protect those who can least afford to lose money at the gaming tables and slots.

People — all people — rich or poor have the freedom right now to spend what they want—and can—at gambling emporiums in Richmond, New Kent County and Hampton. They also can drive – or take a bus trip—two hours north to Maryland to the MGM National Harbor or other casinos in Dover, Del., and in and around Baltimore.

We question whether some of the criticism is fueled by the jealousy of traditional white interests who aren't running this show, and therefore may not personally benefit from the casino as they would have with the proposed Coliseum project.

While some critics say the casino-resort would not be located near a big shopping area or near areas like Downtown or the museum district with plenty of other attractions and restaurants, we

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 21 October 2021 11:00 -

believe the planned site along heavily traveled Interstate 95 will attract tourists and visitors from along the East Coast to stop, stay and spend money at the gaming tables, or to take in a concert or to enjoy a weekend resort getaway.

We remind our readers that many people thought Walt Disney was crazy when he said he was going to build an amusement park in the middle of a Florida swamp. His vision and imagination, like ONE Casino + Resort's creators, were much bigger than many people could fathom.

But like Orlando, Fla., South Side Richmond will change if the casino is approved by voters and built there. And like Disney's Magic Kingdom, ONE Casino + Resort will be a big boost and draw for the city, which can certainly stand to benefit from a successful shiny project in the coming years.

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