

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot creates Casino Advisory Council to offer input on Bally's plans

Written by Administrator

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Mayor Lori Lightfoot created a special City Council committee to consider “all things” casino and stacked it with her handpicked committee chairs, [only to go around it and roll the dice with Bally's plan](#) to build a \$1.7 billion casino in River West.

Area residents can only hope Lightfoot's latest attempt at casino collaboration is more genuine and lasts longer.

Weeks after Bally's filed its application with the Illinois Gaming Board, Lightfoot created a Casino Community Advisory Council to serve as what she called a “channel for community input” as the approval process advances.

It includes four “neighborhood representatives” and 15 “issue experts.” Support will be provided by two city departments — Transportation and Planning and Development — as well as the city's chief financial officer and Lightfoot's Office of Community Engagement.

The group is expected to meet quarterly and serve as a “forum for ongoing community engagement.”

The primary focus is the permanent casino site at Chicago Avenue and Halsted Street. But the advisory council will also consider the formidable issues related to operation of the temporary casino expected to open next year at Medinah Temple in River North.

Ald. Brian Hopkins (2nd), who opposed the River West site from the get-go, said he appreciates civic leaders “donating their time to serve.”

Still, he said he is skeptical.

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"Recent history suggests they won't have any influence," Hopkins said. "I know from experience, as a member of the last casino committed formed by this mayor [that] it was nothing but a façade of political cover," Hopkins wrote in a text message to the Sun-Times.

"She gave us a cat toy to bat across the carpet while she was in the back room making her secret deals."

Ald. Brendan Reilly (42nd) agreed the City Council committee was "assembled to be a rubber stamp," and he said he suspects that the advisory committee "has been formed for the very same purpose."

"The lack of downtown stakeholders from the 42nd Ward and the exclusion of important neighborhood groups is frustrating. It's pretty clear the administration doesn't have much interest in hearing from those people who are most directly impacted by the temporary and permanent casinos," Reilly wrote in an email to the Sun-Times.

Retiring Zoning Committee Chairman Tom Tunney (44th) said he viewed the casino council as a "gesture of good faith engagement with neighbors most impacted by" the casino.

"There's a lot of concerns over there. Traffic, noise, concerts. The kinds of outdoor activities that create a lot of noise. They've got to hammer that out. There's still a willingness [by Bally's] to work out whatever the community needs," Tunney said.

Brian Israel, president of the River North Residents Association, said he is willing to give Lightfoot the "benefit of the doubt" and "participate as though it's a serious effort to get community input" and more than window dressing.

Although Bally's already has filed its application and amending it would be difficult, Israel said he hopes at least some of the 42 "improvements" to the casino development proposed by the River North Residents Association can still be adopted to "reduce harmful external impacts for the community."

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Among them:

- Replacing the outdoor music venue with a public park.
- Conducting all concerts and performances indoors and limiting those events to 15 days per month.
- Building an eastbound exit ramp and westbound entrance ramp connecting Bally's River West casino directly to the Ohio-Ontario feeder ramp to minimize use of surface streets. Also, extending Jefferson Street to Grand Avenue to relieve Halsted Street congestion.

"I think we'll get some things. Others will be difficult and expensive and take a long time, and some others will probably be off the table. But we have to do the best we can on behalf of our constituents. We're appreciative that the administration is at least open to having a dialogue with the community," Israel said.

Pressed to identify recommendations he considers most important, Israel pointed to security, because "our community has really been suffering with very high incidence of serious crime."

Israel won't serve on the committee, but Robin Schabes, who chairs the association's development and land use committee, will be a member.

Israel acknowledged entrance/exit ramps would be "nice to have," but are "relatively unlikely."

"It's expensive and would delay the project," he said.

"The goal there was simply to acknowledge the fact that there's going to be a lot of additional traffic on surface streets. People coming from outside will have to get off on Ohio, turn right on

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Orleans, turn right again on Grand and head out to the casino on the other side of the river. That's a lot of additional surface traffic in an area that's already terribly congested. So, you can see why it's a concern to people who live there."

Read more <https://chicago.suntimes.com/city-hall/2022/9/8/23343328/chicago-ballys-casino-advisory-council-created-lightfoot-river-west>