

In a *Chicago Tribune/WGN* poll released yesterday, it reported that nearly half of the respondents support a land-based casino in Chicago. The actual tally was 47 percent for versus 41 percent against. This is important because it supports the Illinois State Senate's approval of a major state-wide gambling expansion bill earlier this month that would

include that provision. This issue has been debated throughout Richard M. Daley's mayoral administration and may be the most significant Chicago-focused legislation enacted just before he leaves office.

In terms of history, this Examiner correspondent was personally involved in examining the merits of establishing a land-based casino in Chicago during the Jim Edgar administration. For those who do not remember, he was Illinois' governor before Pat Quinn, Rod Blagojevich and George Ryan. This is not new. But it is very timely.

The public support and legislative action may have been spurred because of the dire condition of the Illinois economy. The latest estimates show that the state may have a budget deficit as high as \$15 billion and also have a ticking fiscal time-bomb in public pension debt that may detonate as soon as in five years.

The arguments have not changed much over the years. They are typically similar to these:

- Why should Illinois towns like Alton and Metropolis get casinos and not Chicago?

- The social/societal/crime problems and costs outweigh any fiscal gains.

- The City of Chicago and the state are losing money because Chicago gamblers are going to nearby Indiana casinos.

- Casino gambling does not import dollars and only transfers money from other entertainment options.

- People are already gambling in the lottery and NCAA pools and on Fantasy Football so why not.

- Gambling is just morally wrong.

Regardless of where a voter philosophically stands on the issue, Governor Quinn and the Illinois House must weigh their decisions against the economic realities of the budget deficit, the pension funding issue and a state unemployment rate of 9.6 percent. In addition to that, Chicago tourism is a proven economic engine that if enhanced, could make these U.S. Travel Association 2008 figure increase:

- Domestic and international travelers spent more than \$51 billion in Illinois;

- Chicago was the 9th most popular city for overseas visitors to the U.S.;

- Domestic and international travel spending in Illinois generated \$5.5 billion in tax revenue

for the federal, state and local governments; and

- Tourism accounted for 584,000 jobs in Illinois and a payroll that topped \$15 billion.

It may be too much to consider during the legislative veto session which ends on January 11, 2011. But a major issue that would need to be addressed is whether they are voting on a basic entertainment complex that would be open to attract everyday Chicagoans or a palatial facility that would target international business travelers.

The decision may be driven by special interests. It is obvious that the memberships of the Illinois /Motel Association, Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, Illinois Restaurant Association, construction and service unions and Chicago cab companies would benefit from a land-based Chicago casino and they will definitely lobby for it. But, will religious leaders, entities that rehabilitate habitual gamblers and anti-crime advocates yell louder?

This seems like it should be the opening question in the debates next year to replace Mayor Daley. But, there is a possibility that the decision may already be made by then.

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