

Love Chicago? You likely give thumbs-up to the casino plan

Written by Administrator

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When Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced that she had selected the only North Side option for the city's first casino, she riled many aldermen, especially those who had hoped for a different location. But most Cook County residents, it turns out, are A-OK with her choice.

Time will tell whether Lightfoot's casino pays off in jobs and economic growth, but new public opinion polling suggests that the casino has in some ways become a proxy for how residents view the Chicago area more broadly.

To gauge how those who live in the Chicago area feel about the proposed casino, The Harris Poll surveyed a representative sample of them about the project and the city. We found that support for the casino strongly corresponded with one's view of the Chicago area generally: Supporters of the North Side casino complex tend to be markedly more upbeat about the city than opponents.

Compared to supporters, casino critics are twice as likely to describe metro Chicago as struggling (32% to 16%). Two-thirds of casino supporters have a positive view of greater Chicago and believe that it is attracting new residents and businesses, while only 50% of critics say the same.

In this sense, how you view the casino depends on whether you see Chicago's glass as half full or half empty. If you are a booster, the casino represents a new opportunity — and no surprise, people who live in the city itself more often view the venture favorably — and you may be more likely to care about the specific payoff: money flowing into first responders' chronically underfunded pension plans. But if you're a skeptic, the notion of a new casino brings with it the ills of gambling: corruption, dependence and decay.

Tellingly, both sides are glum about the South and West sides, with pluralities saying that these parts of the city are on their way down. Majorities of both groups described the North Side as being "established," which raises questions about whether the casino's expected economic development might have done more for Chicago if Lightfoot had chosen one of the South Side sites on her list of finalists. But these could well be chicken-and-egg conundrums: Would the casino provide the spark for an ailing area or would neighborhood decay undercut the new establishment?

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In any case, the top-line figures suggest that the mayor and her City Council allies did not hurt themselves politically in May by approving the Bally's plan to convert a 30-acre industrial site in River West into a \$1.74 billion entertainment complex that, in addition to a gambling floor with 3,400 slot machines, includes a 500-room hotel, a 3,000-seat theater, six restaurants, a park and a Riverwalk extension.

When told about the scale of the project, as well as the fact that it is expected to pump \$200 million annually into pensions for Chicago police and firefighters, 54% of representative adults polled in the online survey said that they support the casino, with 20% opposed and 26% neither for nor against it.

Here again, differences emerge among demographics groups. Those who live in the city itself, for example, more often support the project than those who live in the Cook County suburbs (56% to 51%). There's an even wider gap between men and women in favoring the casino (61% to 48%). Support falls under 50% for adults with less than a high school education and rises to at least 60% for adults with household incomes of \$100,000 and up.

Chicago certainly needs an economic boost, based on our survey. A plurality of area residents (34%) describe the city as declining. Many of those challenges are seen as happening in the South and West sides, but perhaps ominously, more than three-quarters of area residents believe that downtown Chicago has gotten more dangerous in the last year.

Still, two-thirds overall say they enjoy spending time downtown. Will that share rise if the 312 area code includes a casino? Bally's has submitted an application to the Illinois Gaming Board for a license and also still needs permission from the Chicago Plan Commission to move ahead. If everything goes to plan, the new complex won't open until 2026.

But Bally's plans to open an interim casino in the Medinah Temple in River North in 2023, so we should get an early sense of its impact.

How will it all turn out? Place your bets.

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