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# Are We Ready For This?

*Karen Loysen, AIA, President*



*Staggering dollar amounts are being spent on land speculation and are anticipated for new development, yet no one knows the life expectancy or long-term effects of the riverboat gambling industry.*

## Perhaps the largest single industry to impact

our city in the near future will be riverboat gambling. Although neither state legislation nor local referendum are passed, the potential for riverboat gambling is already changing the economics of land development and will continue to effect waterfront land values as long as there is a remote possibility of acquiring gambling licenses. Staggering dollar amounts are being spent on land speculation and are anticipated for new development, yet no one knows the life expectancy or long-term effects of the riverboat gambling industry. With these uncertainties, it seems unwise to let gambling overrun our cities. For Pittsburgh, the next year is the time to ask and answer questions, to clarify long-term development goals and determine how (or whether) gambling can be a successful part of these goals.

Can we insure gambling sites are placed where they would contribute to broader development? With the possible exception of the LTV site, the city does not control any of the riverfront areas currently considered for gambling locations (an unfortunate consequence of inadequate land-banking in the past). There must be sufficient control over the way a site is developed and the quality of its design. Are existing zoning and design controls adequate to insure this? Is the existing Conditional Use process enough?

Is it appropriate to let gambling operators become urban project developers (building a new stadium, expanding the convention center) as the carrot dangled for licensing approval? Will we measure proposals by the free toasters offered on the side? If one of the benefits of gambling is the ability to fund projects, the city may consider requiring contribution dollars rather than the finished product in order to obtain better development control and discretion.

Can the city be a "partner" in gambling development and still retain objectivity in the development review and approval process? Advantages and disadvantages

of the city being an insider should be considered.

What is the right number of licenses? The quantity will greatly effect physical development. Lessons of inadequate limits can be learned from Biloxi and the Gulf Coast—for both business success and growth management. Further, as long as there remains potential for granting new licenses, riverfront land costs will remain inflated and other riverfront uses, such as residential, recreational and light industrial, will not be viable.

Traffic needs to be accommodated—shortfalls could suffocate both new and existing business. These needs should be dovetailed with other development plans such as the Mon-Fayette Expressway in Homestead, inter-modal transportation sites, or with areas already having sufficient traffic and parking capacity, such as Station Square or the stadium. The impact of "travel vs. dock" on traffic should be considered. "Travel" may require a large number of parking spaces to accommodate both outgoing and incoming cruises. In addition, the aesthetics of traffic and parking along the river must be reviewed.

And what about the boats? If the boats travel, they can only be as tall as bridge clearances allow. If they remain docked, should there be size limits? Should there be design guidelines for boats? Should they be required to look like boats rather than buildings? Should there be signage restrictions?

In the next year, these and many other questions must be addressed if riverboat gambling development is to be well managed. And it is not only "the city" that needs to grapple with these issues. Many architects and contractors will become participants in gambling ventures or consultants to cities where gambling is being considered. We must be aware of the issues surrounding such development—especially as riverfront sites are so prominent and the developments we create can change the image of the city. This could be an outstanding opportunity, or the worst place to make a mistake. ■

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### On the cover:

*Pool Pavilion, Montgomery County, PA designed by Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, AIA, 1994 Firm of the Year.*