

**City of Schenectady
Planning Commission
Meeting Minutes
July 22, 2015**

I. CALL TO ORDER

Commissioner Coppola called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m.

II. ATTENDANCE

PRESENT: Sharran Coppola, Chair; Bradley Lewis; Chris Rush; Julia Stone; Mary Moore Wallinger; Thomas Carey; Jason Bogdanowicz-Wilson; Sara Bonacquist; Christine Primiano, Principal Planner; Rachael Ward, Deputy Corporation Counsel

EXCUSED: Matt Cuevas, Vice Chair

III. CONFLICT OF INTEREST CHECK

None.

IV. APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES

Minutes from the June 17, 2015 meeting will be considered at the next regularly scheduled Planning Commission meeting on August 19, 2015.

V. NEW BUSINESS

A. CAPITAL REGION GAMING, LLC requests site plan approval pursuant to Section 264-90 B of a proposal to construct a 147,800 square foot casino and a 17,894 square foot hotel at 301 Nott Street, Mohawk Harbor, tax parcel #39.49-2-1.311, located in a “C-3” Waterfront Mixed Use District.

Prior to the beginning of the presentation, Commissioner Coppola explained that any sub-committee work by the Commissioners regarding this proposal had been done as a fact-finding tool only. She explained that any subcommittee presentations made to the Commissioners were only for the purpose of making the communication of copious amounts of information easier and more workable. Commissioner Coppola assured the public that the subcommittee meetings are solely for the purpose of information gathering and that city staff and the Chair were present at every meeting.

Mike Levin of Development Management Associates and Brian Fink, Architect, of Klai Juba Wald Architects, presented the proposal. Mr. Levin began the presentation with an overview of the design process for the casino. He stated that the original design had been proposed prior to anyone on the design team having spent a lot of time in Schenectady or knowing much about the history of the city. He explained that once the Gaming Commission had approved the site for a casino, and the team had spent more time in the city,

they felt compelled to change the design to reflect more of Schenectady's history. He admitted that the second design submitted perhaps went too far towards the historical context side of the design and eliminated too much of the contemporary feel of the building. Mr. Levin noted that at the June 2015 Planning Commission meeting he and the design team received some very valuable comments and feedback, which they strongly considered when finalizing the third design.

Mr. Levin briefly reviewed the site plan details as he had presented at the June meeting. The site plan remains largely unchanged from the previous design, with the major changes being to the facades of the casino and the adjoining hotel. He also briefly reviewed the landscaping plan, which had been explained in detail at the June meeting and remains virtually unchanged. Mr. Levin then turned the floor over to Brian Fink, lead architect for the project, to review and explain the changes to the casino design.

Mr. Fink began his presentation with an overview of the new proposed building materials. The brick was completely removed from the design. The new materials consist of textured metal panels, wood, precast concrete, glass, and stone. He explained that the use of these different materials was used throughout the facades to break up the horizontal mass of the building, which extends 300 feet. Mr. Fink noted that several framed areas of the front and rear facades were created to emphasize separate sections of the building, as opposed to one long mass.

Mr. Levin followed with an overview of the signage proposal for the casino and hotel. He presented details of the directional signage, the signs affixed to the casino and hotel, and the pylon sign. He noted that the actual amount of signage had decreased from the previous proposal, and that the total of 13,700 square feet being proposed falls well below the 19,000 square feet allowed. He presented a detailed drawing of the revised pylon sign, which will mimic the new building materials proposed for the casino. Mr. Levin noted that the applicants believe the pylon sign to be absolutely essential for the identification of the casino by passing drivers, as the casino will sit 750 feet from the future roundabout and will not be visible from the roadway. He showed several photographs of views taken from the surrounding neighborhoods to demonstrate that the sign will not be visible from the neighboring residential areas.

Commissioner Coppola then opened the floor for public comments prior to the Commissioners' discussion of the proposal.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

A letter from Melinda Perrin, county resident, was entered into the record. Ms. Perrin commented that she does not feel that the public has been offered a

detailed enough view of the new design, and that a project of this importance for the region should receive more consideration.

Anthony Curran III, resident of Albany Street, spoke in opposition to the casino being located in Schenectady, although he said he did not dislike the new design.

David Giacolone, resident of 16 Washington Avenue, spoke in opposition to the pylon sign and presented supporting materials for the record. He stated that the sign would be too large, too visible from the surrounding neighborhoods, and would emit too much light. He also stated that he felt the design to be uninspired. *Mr. Levin responded that the sign lighting has been designed to exceed the city requirements regarding light spillage. He noted that the LED display will change most frequently every 8 seconds (DOT standard) and that the entire sign will dim at night when it is not necessary to be as bright as during the day. He explained that the top portion of the sign will be internally illuminated, and that the portion of the sign structure actually used for casino signage is below the 70% allowed. Commissioner Carey stated that internally lit signs are normally not allowed under the sign ordinance. City Planner Primiano noted that the casino is exempt.*

Chuck Steiner, President of the Schenectady Chamber, spoke in support of the new design.

Maxine Borom, resident of Schenectady County, spoke in opposition to the new design. She stated that she felt that the first design was much more creative and inspired, and had more of a vertical emphasis than the next two designs. She explained that in her opinion the second design and the third design look very similar, but with different materials. *Mr. Levin noted that the original design looked different from the second two because the first design was conceptual and the entire layout of the site plan changed prior to the second design. He noted that a portion of the first design was built over College Creek, which is not allowed. He also noted that moving the casino on the site allowed better access to the river, as well as facilitating the creation of the portion of the site that will now be landscaped green space but will be ready for future development as needed. He explained that in the first design the entrance to the hotel was from the casino, which would have restricted the entrance to those over 21 years of age only. The shifting of the hotel entrance will allow for anyone to enter.*

Glen Tabolt, President of STS Steel, acknowledged the extensive work the Planning Commission and staff had put into the consideration of the project. He stated that he wanted the Commissioners to be aware that STS is still in negotiations with Galesi Group regarding the easement that is shown on the site plan as part of the parking lot for the casino.

Jason Planck, city resident, spoke regarding the illumination of the pylon sign and stated that he believes that there would be too much light pollution from the whole casino project. He also stated that he is concerned about accessibility issues for the disabled for many of the outdoor areas of the Mohawk Harbor project.

Camille Sasanowski, resident of Claredon Street, stated that she is concerned about light pollution from the casino and the affect that it could have on the neighbor's property values.

Commissioner Wallinger noted that a detailed photometric plan was submitted by the applicant to the Engineering Department for review and approval, and that the city has very strict standards regarding light spillage and pollution.

Richard Unger, resident of the Stockade, spoke in favor of the new casino design but stated that he does not like the design of the pylon sign. He stated that he would like to see the top portion of the sign be backlit or a darker background color as opposed to the internally-lit white.

Marilyn Ruscitto of East Front Street spoke in favor of the casino and the sign. She stated that she like the design and feels that it is a great improvement over anything else that has ever been on the site.

Following the public comment period, Commissioner Coppola opened the floor for discussion from the Commissioners. City Planner Primiano noted that the code allows a sign of 80 feet, and that the design of the sign can be discussed but the height is allowed as presented. Commissioner Lewis noted that he is pleased with this design for the casino. He also stated that he feels that it maximizes the public access to the river on this site, which will provide a lot of access to the waterfront where in the past there has been none. Commissioner Stone stated that she likes the new design much better than the previous design. Commissioner Wilson stated that he also likes the design and feels that it takes positive elements from the first design but adapts them well to the new site plan.

Commissioner Wallinger stated that she appreciates the changes made to the design and like the lighter feel of it, with more glass and more design elements that were shown in the first concept. She asked the applicants if they had considered having some design element that would extend horizontally across the entire façade to tie the separate areas together. Mr. Levin stated that by using the separate framed areas they are attempting to reduce the horizontal mass of the large façade, and that they believe that the use of an element tying them together would work against that. He also noted that the entire façade would seldom be visible at one time, as people would be approaching from different angles.

Commissioner Coppola stated that she is happy with the new design, particularly the side of the building facing the river. She noted that the new design does not feature any rooftop signs, but rather a canopy sign on one of the metal overhang areas. The applicants confirmed that they had eliminated any rooftop signs. Commissioner Bonacquist stated that she is also pleased with the new design of the casino and the hotel, particularly the new upper portion of the hotel, but commented that she feels that the design lacks the iconic imagery that the second design exhibited with the large "RIVERS"

sign. Commissioner Wallinger commented that she very much appreciates the detailed planting plan and that she feels that the applicants listened to the feedback from the Commission regarding the landscaping and pedestrian walkways and took it into account when revising the design.

Commissioner Carey stated that he believes that too much of the site is dedicated to parking and that this will not make the best use of the limited waterfront. He explained that he feels that the lot at the north end of the site should be paved with permeable materials. He also stated that he was disappointed to hear very little mention of the energy impact of the project and attempts to mitigate it, although he understands that this is not an issue under the regulation of the Planning Commission at this time. He noted that this project will be one of the largest energy draws in the city, and that he believes that a responsible developer would address this issue more proactively than it was in this case, with the generic environmental impact statement having been completed before the casino development was even considered.

Mr. Levin responded that it is a requirement that the project be LEED certified in order to secure the casino license. He noted the Des Plaines casino designed by his firm was the first gold certified LEED casino in the country. He stated that while he does not know if gold certification will be attainable in this case due to pre-existing issues with the site, he assured the Commission that it is the developers intent to get as close as they can to meeting that goal.

Commissioner Carey stated that while he recognizes that there was a zoning change to allow the size of the pylon sign, he feels that the sign is very large, particularly the LED display portion, and that it will have a big impact on the surrounding area. He urged the applicants to do all that they can to mitigate the impact of the sign. Mr. Levin responded that the sign in Des Plaines stands at 68 feet, but that the casino is much closer to the main road and is visible from it, which is not true in this case.

The discussion of the pylon sign continued with Commissioner Stone noting that she does not like the new design, and feels it seems too much like one large heavy mass. Commissioner Wallinger stated that she likes the design of the sign, and the materials, which clearly mirror the materials used in the casino design. She noted that she feels that the internally lit white portion at the top of the sign stands apart too much from the rest of the design. She suggested the use of a darker background color with lighted letters, as shown on the example of the Des Plaines sign. Mr. Levin stated that the white internally lit portion at the top of the sign was chosen in order to achieve a lantern-like appearance, which was one of the goals of the design. He noted that they would be willing to consider a slightly darker background color for the top portion, rather than white. Commissioner Wilson stated that he felt

that the sign used too much of the cheaper-looking materials from the casino, such as the metal panels, as opposed to more stone and glass.

Commissioner Lewis stated that he is happy with the design of the sign and does not feel that the light will be disturbing to neighbors, particularly since the applicants are required to meet the strict city code requirements. He also noted that he liked the LED portion of the sign, and the flexibility of display that it will allow. Mr. Levin noted that the LED portion of the sign will also be made available for the advertising of special events and even community events that are not specific to the casino. Commissioner Rush noted that he also liked the Des Plaines sign more because of the darker background and backlit letters. He stated that he did not like the internally-lit white portion of the sign.

After considering the discussion of the Commissioners, Mr. Fink sketched a slightly different pylon sign design using more glass and stone and presented it to the Commissioners for feedback. Commissioners Bonacquist and Wallinger stated that they preferred the design depicted on the sketch more than the original. City Planner Primiano noted that this discussion of design details was more a matter of personal opinion as opposed to a site plan issue, and that it was not a sufficient enough reason to hold up the consideration of the whole proposal. Commissioner Coppola suggested the use of a subcommittee to work with the applicants to finalize the details of the sign, or the alternative of allowing the applicants to submit a revised design to the City Planner for final approval. The Commissioners discussed this and decided that they believed the sign to be a large enough issue that it should be considered by a subcommittee. Commissioners Lewis, Rush, Wilson, and Bonacquist were selected for the subcommittee.

SITE PLAN APPROVAL

Motion by Commissioner Lewis, seconded by Commissioner Wilson, to accept the proposal with the following condition:

- A subcommittee of Commissioners Lewis, Rush, Wilson, and Bonacquist will work with the applicant to review and approve the final design, colors, and materials of the pylon sign. The location and height of the sign is approved as submitted.

Motion carried, with Commissioner Carey opposed.

VI. OLD BUSINESS

None.

VII. MISCELLANEOUS

Commissioner Coppola announced to the Commissioners that this would be her last meeting as Chair and that she will be resigning her position as Planning

Commissioner. The Commissioners congratulated her on a job well done and thanked her for her many years of exemplary service.

VIII. MOTION TO ADJOURN

Motion by Commissioner Wilson, seconded by Commissioner Lewis, to adjourn the meeting.

Meeting was adjourned at 8:32 p.m.