

Three casino bidders deliver pitches, promises to City Council

Pittsburgh City Council members pressed would-be casino owners yesterday on promises to redevelop and aid neighborhoods, and got very different answers.

Isle of Capri Casinos Inc. defended its focus on the Hill District. Forest City Enterprises argued for spreading the wealth. And Detroit businessman Don Barden's Majestic Star Casino offered North Side and Hill District aid but bemoaned the cascade of promises.

Part of the state gambling law was written „for the express purpose of preventing a gaming company from buying a license“ with promises, said Robert Oltmanns, a consultant to Majestic Star. He said his client didn't include pledges in its casino application.

The three companies have applied to the state Gaming Control Board for the license to build a slot machine casino in Pittsburgh. Council has no formal role in making the selection.

Forest City spokesman Abe Naparstek touted his company's pledge of a USD 25 million grant to Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation and USD 1 million a year for development „to the Pittsburgh community at large.“ The company hasn't promised to help fund an arena.

„A USD 290 million privately funded arena is going to hit far more neighborhoods and people in the region than USD 1 million spread around the whole county,“ countered David Morehouse, a consultant for the Penguins. The team is working with Isle of Capri, which has guaranteed an arena, a USD 350 million

development and USD 1 million a year in development grants, all for the Lower Hill, if it gets the license.

The city's Urban Redevelopment Authority board will consider an option agreement with Isle of Capri tomorrow for the purchase of two agency-owned parcels along Colwell Street and two lots on Fifth Avenue. The purchases are contingent on Isle of Capri getting the slots license.

Mr. Oltmanns said Majestic Star has matched Isle of Capri's USD 350 million Hill redevelopment pledge, because of „the competitive nature“ of the process.

He said the law bars promises beyond the USD 50 million license fee, but the gaming board later issued an opinion permitting development pledges.

The company plans to aid the North Side Leadership Conference with development, he said, but details, including the dollars involved, are confidential.

Asked if Majestic Star would amend its application to the gaming board to make its pledges binding, he said that was „not something that is easily done.“