

Council to sue over casino records

By a vote of 7-0, the Metro Council voted Wednesday to file a lawsuit and use any legal means necessary to get information about the economic impact of Pinnacle Entertainment's proposed riverboat casino project in south Baton Rouge.

Pinnacle had released an economic impact study in May, but declined through its lawyers to release a revised study that it recently submitted to the Louisiana Gaming Control Board. However, documents released this week by the board show that in addition to building a 140,000 square foot casino and a 300-room hotel, Pinnacle is planning recreational, retail and residential properties.

Councilman Pat Culbertson, who opposes the Pinnacle proposal in his district, submitted a public records request for all documents submitted by Pinnacle to the state Gaming Control Board since its last appearance before the board Aug. 21.

Because of proprietary concerns, the state Attorney General's Office declined to release the revised economic study.

Pinnacle spokeswoman Pauline Yoshihashi said company representatives had offered to meet privately with Culbertson to discuss revised plans for the proposed casino, but he declined.

Instead, Culbertson invited Pinnacle officials to a town hall meeting at 7 p.m. Monday at the Bluebonnet Regional Branch Library.

Yoshihashi said Culbertson's suggestion was unacceptable because Pinnacle is planning to go public with the proposal Tuesday at the state Gaming Control Board meeting.

She said that Pinnacle is still planning to ask the council for a Feb. 8 election date. The state constitution requires any expansion of gambling, such as new riverboat, to get the approval of voters in that parish.

"There's going to be plenty of time between the Gaming Control Board meeting on Tuesday and Feb. 8 for public discussion and debate," Yoshihashi said.

Councilman David Boneno said he met with Pinnacle officials, but did not receive information about a revised study. "It was mainly a Power Point presentation that showed sketches of what the buildings would look like," he said.

Councilman Ulysses "Bones" Addison said he's inclined to vote against allowing Pinnacle to get on the Feb. 8 ballot if it insists on withholding information. "We deserve to know what they are doing," he said.

Councilwoman Lorri Burgess said Pinnacle was criticized when it came before the council in May asking for an election date even before it received state Gaming Control Board approval for the project.

"If they are following the process, why are we asking them to give us this information at this point, before it's even on our agenda," Burgess asked.

Voting to pursue a public records request lawsuit were Culbertson, Boneno, Addison, Mike Walker, Mickey Skyring, Martha Jane Tassin and Joe Greco. The others were either absent or did not vote.

A retired LSU economics professor, Culbertson has been extremely critical of Pinnacle's original economic impact study because it shows most of the proposed casino's business coming from Baton Rouge's existing casinos, the Belle of Baton Rouge and Hollywood Casino.

The initial study projected the proposed Pinnacle casino would attract 1.77 million patrons per year, with 1.26 million coming in the form of “displaced” gamblers from the existing riverboats. The original study projected a net increase of USD 9.9 million per year in state tax revenue and a net increase of USD 1.2 million in city-parish boarding fees.

Mayor-President Kip Holden said he met with Pinnacle officials Monday about the project, but did not make any commitments. He said he thinks the issue should be decided by East Baton Rouge Parish voters.

Meanwhile, the documents released this week by the state Gaming Control Board reveal some details about the proposed casino and the hotel Pinnacle is planning to build in the three phases on the Mississippi River near Gardere Lane. About 100 hotel rooms would be set aside for extended stays, according to the documents.

The project also calls for a 250-acre golf course with Cook Mansion as its clubhouse, a 3.6-acre equestrian center and a planned mix-use development. A proposed town center would include a 12.5-acre park, 275,000 square feet of retail space, 240 apartments and 420 single-family homes.

In other action, the council:

- Voted to reimburse Burgess USD 18,880 in legal fees and expenses for successfully defending herself against a lawsuit filed by the group A6 over her vote for mayor pro tem.
- Agreed to spend USD 500,000 to help establish a new micro-loan program for businesses that cannot qualify for conventional financing. The USD 2.5 million program will offer loans ranging from USD 5,000 to USD 150,000, with interest rates from 7 percent to 9 percent.