

SugarHouse sues city to get casino built

SugarHouse Casino asked the state Supreme Court on Thursday to cut through what it called „obstructionist“ political opposition in Philadelphia and allow its USD 550 million project to move ahead.

In suing the administration and City Council, SugarHouse joined the city's other planned casino, Foxwoods, in forsaking the political process for the courts. Foxwoods Casino has also asked the Supreme Court to require the city to approve its project. (Virtually all issues connected with the licensing, planning and zoning of the state's nascent slots industry go directly to the highest court, by law.)

The lawsuit's intent: „to force these guys to do what they're legally obligated to do,“ said SugarHouse's lawyer, Stephen Cozen.

Cozen was joined by labor leaders who urged the city to build the casinos now.

Critics responded that SugarHouse was panicking in the face of a new administration, likely to be led by Michael Nutter, that wants to move the casinos.

On Tuesday, Nutter urged the state House of Representatives' Committee on Gaming Oversight to recommend a bill that would require a 1,500-foot buffer between casinos and homes, which would outlaw the riverfront sites chosen – SugarHouse in Fishtown/Northern Liberties and Foxwoods in Pennsport.

Nutter spokeswoman Melanie Johnson said: „This is very important to him.“

„We think they're just desperate,“ said Debbie King, vice

president of the Northern Liberties Neighbors Association and a spokesman for the Philadelphia Neighborhood Alliance, a coalition of community groups.

SugarHouse officials said Nutter's position did not drive their decision.

„We simply feel it is time to move forward,“ SugarHouse spokeswoman Leigh Whitaker said.

Mayor Street wrote a letter to Council last week, urging members to approve bills for SugarHouse's required zoning and site plan, and warning that the further blocking of the project would result in just what SugarHouse was looking for – an order for the city to approve the project as submitted. Street has counted on USD 26 million in annual casino revenues in the city's five-year financial plan.

SugarHouse contends that City Council, primarily district Councilman Frank DiCicco, has intentionally erected roadblocks that go beyond the city's power, which is to regulate the community impacts of the casino. The Supreme Court has already dictated that the state Gaming Control Board, not the city, has authority to choose the casino sites.

DiCicco, whose district includes both casinos, has openly worked to slow down the process. He said that SugarHouse still had not provided solutions to traffic problems or public-safety issues.

„Unless we can address those problems, how do they expect me to support it?“ DiCicco said.

SugarHouse also would need to acquire state-owned riverfront land to build the project as proposed. Christopher Craig, chief counsel for State Sen. Vincent J. Fumo (D., Phila.), said: „They cannot claim the city is holding things up when the facts are clear that SugarHouse does not have their own property rights established yet.“