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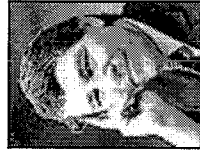
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Why casinos failed to redevelop downtown Detroit

By George Cantor / The Detroit News



When casinos were being sold to Detroiters, it was claimed that they would be a strong force in the revival of the downtown core. Somehow this did not happen. What a surprise.

It is in the nature of casinos to be self-contained. Their operators don't want patrons wandering around outside because they then might come to their senses and go home. The object is to keep them within a controlled environment.

However, the thinking went, if one or more of the casinos were placed along, say, Washington Boulevard, it might have an ancillary impact on a street that needs any kind of impact.

With two abandoned hotels anchoring either end of what was once the stateliest avenue in the city, and the absurd tinker-toy decor on its sidewalk, Washington Boulevard is a mess -- but not beyond resuscitation. Even a slight increase in pedestrian traffic could be enough to get a pulse.

So the original plan, the recommendation of former Mayor Dennis Archer's casino commission, was to situate casinos nearby, within the heart of downtown. These were brushed aside, for reasons that still aren't clear, and only the Greektown operation wound up within the downtown grid.

Both the MGM Grand and Motor City located their "temporary" casinos at the outer extremities of the downtown area, with easy access to freeway ramps. They seem quite happy to stay there.

Now it appears the Greektown operators want to do the same. They are contemplating a move that will place their permanent casino at the edge of I-375 in the northeast corner of downtown.

They want to make the move even though a People Mover station feeds right into the current casino. Obviously, the People Mover was irrelevant. The number of people who used the system to reach the casino was minimal.

The People Mover was also sold on the idea that it would create downtown development along its route. Watch my hand and see if you can guess which shell the little pea is under.

It is apparent that many casino customers do not welcome the opportunity to drive the downtown streets. They want to get off the freeway, into the parking structures and then right out again.

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You can see that happening now with the construction on the lower edge of the Lodge Freeway. There are many alternate ways to get downtown on surface streets without getting tangled up in the congestion. But not many people choose them, either because they are nervous about driving through Detroit or because they began driving after the freeways were in place and have no idea where the surface streets go.

The casino managements know this. They are in business to make money, not rebuild downtown Detroit. You can't knock them for making the smartest location decisions.

Besides, where would the city be without its casino revenues? Up the creek that appears on no map.

When the casino leaves Greektown, however, an empty Trapper's Alley will remain. But we'll worry about that tomorrow.

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