

Don't pile a casino on top of downtown arts center

I am putting the finishing touches on another column bashing the state's latest effort to balance the budget with gambling.

I'm interrupting that rant for now to take on another, related, matter — the possibility of a downtown casino in Rochester.

First, my usual disclaimer: I do not gamble and I am bored by the thought of sitting in front of a slot machine or at a table playing cards, rolling dice, or watching a little ball roll around a roulette wheel.

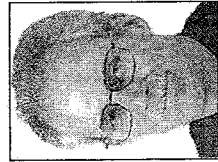
I do not object to gambling, however, so long as it's in the form of harmless entertainment — not life-wrecking addiction.

So in principle, I do not object to a Native American casino in Rochester. Last week, rumors began to circulate that the Oklahoma-based Seneca-Cayuga Tribe and Wilmore Inc. Chairman

Thomas C. Wilmore might be interested in a plan that would incorporate the proposed performing arts center into a casino. This casino/theater would be built with private funds, so local officials would not have to fight for state aid to construct the arts center — part of a Renaissance Center that would also include an underground transit center and a new downtown Monroe Community College campus.

The casino/arts center might eliminate the need for a beg-athon in Albany, and it could (emphasis on *could*; nothing is for sure) be brokered to settle a Seneca-Cayuga land claim against New York state.

A casino might generate a lot of money that could (again, *could*) be used to hold down local taxes or complete other important projects. It could gener-



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ate jobs, maybe not great jobs, but jobs.

But there's a downside, or at least questions that must be answered.

Already there is some speculation that the way to do this is to tear down Midtown Plaza and replace it with a casino. If the casino developers pay for it, we don't need a state check to get our arts center.

Yes, however, we've been talking about an arts center that offers something more than Las Ve-

gas-style shows. It would feature Broadway musicals, plays and concerts. Would a casino theater be radically different?

The Renaissance Center plan endorsed just weeks ago by Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks and Mayor Bill Johnson, as well as many other community leaders, would have the theater on top of an underground transit center on the northwest corner of Main and Clinton. There are many voices to be heard and needs to be accommodated before that plan becomes reality, but if we start talking again about different visions and sites, we're back to where we were two years ago — with no consensus, and no chance of securing whatever state or federal funds may be available.

Private funding is appealing, but it also could be years away.

"Casinos have an incredible upside economically," says Heidi Zimmer-Meyer, president of the Rochester Downtown Development Corporation. "But they are incredibly complicated animals, and we need to understand them before we act."

Zimmer-Meyer believes that even with casinos in Niagara Falls, Buffalo and Turning Stone outside Syracuse, there may still be a substantial visitors market for a Rochester casino, with people coming from the Southern Tier, Finger Lakes and even Canada. But we would need a plan to prevent the deterioration of nearby areas (as has happened in some other places) and a vision for downtown beyond the casino.

I agree. Keep the casino talk on a separate track. Let's avoid the ambivalence that can freeze our community in its tracks. □

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