

Public gives mostly raves to MGM Springfield casino project in first City Council hearing



MGM Springfield President Michael Mathis speaks during a City Council public hearing on Tuesday night, which was followed by reports from consultants and public comments regarding MGM's latest site plans and design changes. (Peter Goonan / The Republican)

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SPRINGFIELD — Many area residents and representatives of business and labor urged the City Council on Tuesday to support the latest design of the MGM Springfield casino project, including some significant changes that have drawn debate and controversy.

Twelve of the 16 speakers spoke favorably of the project, while four expressed questions or concerns.

The comments came during the first of four City Council hearings over the next two weeks to consider the site plans, design changes and other issues related to the \$950 million casino project in the South End area.



The crowd overfilled the council chambers at City Hall, and the hearing, lasting more than 90 minutes, will resume on Wednesday at 7 p.m., in the council chambers.

Those speaking in favor of the project said they believe it needs to move ahead to bring major economic development, revenue and jobs to Springfield. Many urged the council to support changes including plans to eliminate a 25-story hotel tower and replace it with a six-story hotel without a reduction in rooms or quality, a change in design that has triggered criticism in recent weeks.

Speakers said the change and move of the hotel to Main Street from State Street will bring more vitality to the downtown and South End area.

Carol Kerr, a South End resident, said the new design is more conducive to the downtown area, allowing the city to keep its "unique personality."

"This isn't MGM's first rodeo," Kerr said. "They are spending a lot of money and will ensure that they will build an entertainment complex that is the best it can be. It isn't in their best interest to build something less than spectacular."

William Foley, a former city councilor and Springfield resident, said he has never seen such an opportunity for Springfield, with thousands of jobs and \$25 million in annual revenue to the city.

"MGM has been examined and re-examined and found to be an excellent company," Foley said. "It will make the future of Springfield much stronger and more secure."

"This isn't MGM's first rodeo."

A few speakers raised concerns about the project itself and if it will deliver on all its promises. Rhonda Latney of Springfield said she questions if MGM will deliver on all its job promises and revenue promises if there are economic challenges.

A city consultant said Springfield has guarantees on most of its revenues.

Council President Michael Fenton praised the turnout and comments.

"I think we heard from a diversity of perspectives, pro and con, and that's the purpose of these hearings," Fenton said. "We are going to continue our deliberations, hear more from the public (Wednesday) and hopefully get some commentary and questions from the councilors."

Consultants for the city including a representative of Chicago Consultants Studio Inc., of Chicago, said the hotel change and market rate housing changes are improvements to the project, and urged approval of plans.

Under another design change, MGM is proposing that market rate apartments that were proposed on site be moved to off-site locations including the former School Department headquarters on State Street.

Chicago Consultants Studio said the overall scale of the casino project under the change "is a better resolution than the original design and in no way reduces the visual excitement of the project nor the level of quality or attractiveness of the hotel."

David Ciampi, another resident of Springfield, said MGM has shown an "unyielding commitment to the city."

He said the project is about economic revitalization of the city, and helping it become more robust, urging the council to "embrace" the project.

Beyond the hearing Wednesday, there is a hearings scheduled next Monday at 5:30 p.m., at City Hall regarding road closures and amendments to the Host Community Agreement. The council may take votes on Jan. 26, on the site plans and other issues related to the casino, unless members want additional hearings.

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