

Slots & Market East's potential

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by William P. Becker

THE PROPOSAL to relocate the Foxwoods slots palace from the Delaware to Market East has generated considerable comment, and much of it echoes both the support and opposition that the original location received. But the two sites couldn't be more different, and it's important to consider Market East on its own terms.

Whether or not you believe gambling is addictive, exploitative and immoral, or whether it is or isn't the financial engine that will shower desperately needed tax revenue onto our cash-strapped city, are questions that have nothing to do with location, and won't be addressed here.

Although it's understandable that the adjacent Chinatown neighborhood has concerns, we must remember that Market Street, along with Broad, are the axes that define the center of the region. They are physical assets that should be developed to serve everyone, not only the interests of any one group.

On the Delaware, Foxwoods would have been a variation on its big-box neighbors: a stand-alone building, physically separate from adjacent development, accessible almost exclusively by car - a continuation of the area's unfortunate suburban sprawl.

Many critics, bemoaning lost design opportunities, suggested changes they believed would give the project a more urban character, but it's questionable whether they could have overcome the essentially anti-urban context or the resulting traffic jams.

Foxwoods has yet to release any images of its plan for the Market Street location, so it's impossible to evaluate the new design. Encouragingly, the Planning Commission has hired Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn, a nationally renowned urban-design firm, and traffic engineers Parsons Brinckerhoff, to help assess how this use would affect Market East, and how the Market East context might influence the casino design.

After World War II, as the city experienced the same suburban migration that weakened most older U.S. cities, department stores and other retailers opened suburban branches or relocated to the suburbs entirely. Sadly, most of the urban outlets eventually closed.

Market East, the nexus of the city's most successful and vibrant retail commerce - serving all levels of the market throughout the region - became a bleak landscape. As the Center City District has repeatedly shown, Market East is the weak link unable to connect the urban assets of the Convention Center and Penn Center to the west with Independence Mall and the historic district to the east.

This sad transformation didn't escape the notice of city government. Over the last 50 years, there has been a virtually unbroken series of interventions representing a huge investment of public funds, with a decidedly mixed record.

The most successful was the unification of the Pennsylvania and Reading commuter lines, made possible by the rail tunnel from Suburban Station to the new Market East Station that replaced the Reading Terminal, a regional mass-transit infrastructure that other cities can only envy.

The Gallery was another massive intervention, but with a far different outcome. Dominated by the Rouse Co.'s insistence on transplanting its formula for suburban malls into an urban setting, The Gallery was built as a windowless shell anchored by dying department stores and with the same chain stores already available throughout the region.

After an initial flourish, it never came close to restoring Market East to its former retail glory. Despite multiple attempts to improve on the original concept, its retail continues to shrink while growing ever less diverse.

The third major intervention was the Convention Center. Its success spurred tremendous growth in the hospitality sector, but did little to improve the quality of its immediate environment. With the expansion, it remains to be seen whether more of an already good thing will produce more benefit.

Fifty years of massive public intervention and investment suggest that the real question posed by the prospect of a Market East slots palace is whether this type of occupant will help or hinder the much-needed revitalization of this critical piece of Center City now that we know that retail can't reverse history.

LIKE THEM or not, slots palaces comprise unique regional assets that will draw customers from all over the region.

Much has been made of the dramatic growth in the residential population of Center City and environs, which might support new kinds of development.

Can the slots palace spur the growth of an entertainment district along Market East that could become the one place in the city where we might relax our otherwise appropriate vigilance about signage and honky-tonk to foster the growth of our own Times Square or Bourbon Street?

We don't have one of those. Perhaps we should. *

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