

PAUL MCMORROW

## Use casino leverage to fix Filene's site

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THE BOSTON City Council is forming a special committee on gaming so the body will look like it is actually debating whether or not to bring casinos to town. The council's leader also suggested last week that the committee could be useful in pressuring one potential casino developer to patch the hole it owns in downtown Boston. Despite all the big talk, neither move looks like it will be of much effect.

The Menino administration, which almost always gets its way over the council, seems determined to place a casino at Suffolk Downs and allow only its East Boston neighbors to have a say on it. That means the new council committee will have no real leverage with which to threaten Vornado Realty Trust, the firm that is both the creator of the Filene's pit downtown and a 20 percent owner of Suffolk Downs.

But if it really wanted to, the new committee could create genuine pressure on Vornado, and truly hold the developer accountable for blowing a crater in Boston's downtown shopping district three years ago. It's as easy as subjecting Vornado's East Boston casino proposal to a citywide referendum.

In Boston, the casino question is about whether the firm that bulldozed Filene's gets to open a lucrative business. Mayor Menino has already said as much. The longtime Suffolk Downs booster isn't believable playing the bad cop, though.

There won't be any real debate inside the council about bringing casinos to Boston because the council is dominated by two types of politicians - those who are owned and operated by Menino, and those who know that going to war with the mayor means the end of one's political life. The pragmatists are smart enough to pretend to lack ambition beyond the council, while the others owe their livelihood to Hizzoner.

This combination of loyalty and fear usually ensures that Menino gets what he needs from the council. Since he now wants to be sure that a casino lands at Suffolk Downs, he needs the council to decline to hold a citywide referendum on bringing gambling to Boston.

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*There’s an easy way to put some teeth behind these threats. Bostonians should call the bluff.*”

The state’s recently enacted casino law requires local approval of any gambling facility, but legislative supporters of a casino at Suffolk Downs exempted Boston from automatically having to hold a citywide vote, instead allowing the City Council to call for a referendum if it so chooses. Casino proponents wrote the law this way because the council will ultimately do whatever Menino wants it do, and right now, he wants the council to provide Suffolk Downs with the path of least resistance. This means limiting democracy to East Boston, where the vote’s outcome can most easily be controlled.

For Menino and the council, the purpose of dodging a citywide vote is setting up a slam-dunk local approval. But if local approvals are already in the bag, Menino and the City Council don’t have any real sticks to threaten Vornado with. Council President Steve Murphy spoke last week of using the new gaming committee to send a tough message to Vornado. The city has tried this avenue already. It’s been blowing hot rhetoric at Vornado for over three years. Threats and name-calling have failed miserably.

Vornado can do whatever it wants with its downtown pit. The city can’t compel the developer to build - at least without some powerful new leverage in hand. City officials are hoping the threat of holding up a Suffolk Downs casino will light a fire under Vornado, but after rigging the casino law in a Boston casino’s favor, the suggestion that the Menino administration would follow through on its threats and block a Suffolk Downs casino is just not plausible. Vornado knows this, so City Hall’s newest threats are falling flat.

There’s an easy way to put some teeth behind these threats. Bostonians should call the bluff, and make the City Council put its shiny new committee to real use by forcing a citywide referendum on Suffolk Downs and Vornado. Doing so would force Menino to relinquish control of the casino approval process. But it would also throw a legitimate scare into Vornado - something Menino has been unable to do. As long as the Filene’s pit is festering, why should these blight barons stay in business?

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