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THE BUFFALO NEWS

GAMBLING

Partnership speaks out against downtown casino

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The Buffalo Niagara Partnership has gone on record against a casino in the Buffalo Convention Center or anywhere else in downtown Buffalo.

The business and development group, which, at most, had been lukewarm about gambling downtown, announced Monday it is "staunchly opposed" to a Seneca Nation of Indians casino in the heart of the city. It also raised questions about a casino anywhere in Erie County.

Andrew J. Rudnick, Partnership president and chief executive officer, said that, after a careful study of potential impacts, the group found more harm than good in locating a casino in the downtown area.

"We weighed the potential positive job impact of a downtown Seneca casino against the harm it would cause existing efforts in downtown Buffalo and found the downside certainly outweighed any likely benefit," Rudnick said.

A casino, the Partnership concluded, would not bring the touted tourist dollars to downtown, and any spin-off enterprises would prove to be incongruent and detrimental to downtown's economic purposes.

The Partnership also discounted the role of casinos in economic development.

"Rather than seeking a 'silver bullet' solution, Buffalo should take thoughtful, strategic steps toward sustainable revitalization," Rudnick said, citing retailing, housing and "shovel-ready" construction sites as more viable pursuits for downtown.

The Partnership voiced its opposition as a bipartisan group of federal, state and city leaders reportedly has

been pushing the Senecas to shift their interest in Cheektowaga sites back to the city. Lobbying efforts are said to focus on the convention center, the Senecas' first choice for a gambling venue before County Executive Joel A. Giambra pulled it off the table as an option.

As part of the renewed push, sources said, some Seneca leaders recently toured the convention center.

Those urging the Senecas to reconsider downtown sites include Rep. Thomas M. Reynolds, R-Clarence; Assembly Majority Leader Paul A. Tokasz, D-Cheektowaga; and Mayor Anthony M. Masiello. Reynolds, who reportedly has been leading the effort, has declined to discuss any role he might be playing in locating a casino in Erie County.

Masiello said he doesn't buy the Partnership's findings and will continue to pursue a downtown casino.

"The studies I've seen say a casino would create thousands of jobs and lead to millions of dollars in spin-off revenues to existing downtown businesses," the mayor said. "I disagree with the Partnership and will continue to push for a downtown casino as a valid part of our economic development strategy."

Seneca Nation President Rickey L. Armstrong Sr. reiterated Monday that, as announced last August, Senecas prefer Cheektowaga as the location of their Erie County casino.

"Nothing has changed," Armstrong said. "No matter how strongly the non-Indian politicians and business leaders advocate for and against a Buffalo casino, we are still focused on Cheektowaga."

The Senecas reportedly have been concentrating their Cheektowaga search in an area near Buffalo Niagara International Airport.

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Cheektowaga Supervisor Dennis Gabryszak said he is in contact with Seneca leaders on a monthly basis and had no reason to think the Senecas has changed their mind.

"I know there are forces at work to get them to rethink their position, but they've told me nothing that would indicate that they will go another direction," Gabryszak said.

While the Partnership supported the compact between the state and the Seneca Nation that opened the door to as many as three gambling venues, it took a "wait-and-see" position on where the casinos should be located.

Armed with the findings of its casino study, Rudnick said the group now questions the fundamental value of the compact itself.

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