

Would Seneca tribe build arts center?

■ Seneca-Cayuga group could sweeten bid for a casino here.

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STAFF WRITER

As Rochester and Monroe County leaders this week lobby for government funding for a performing arts center, another group may build it for free: Native Americans.

Proponents of a downtown Rochester casino have dangled building the long-awaited performing arts center in hopes of gar-

nering public support, state lawmakers said.

The idea, fueled by a Rochester mall magnate's quest for a casino, has piqued the interest of the state Legislature, which may warm to getting a performing arts center at no expense to taxpayers.

The casino proposal, still

very preliminary, has been discussed for years but has attracted new interest as the state rapidly expands gambling to pay off debt and as local leaders seek to revitalize downtown Rochester.

A casino, in fact, has come up in recent private discussions between state

and local leaders about the performing arts center.

"It's very intriguing," said Sen. James Alesi, R-Perrinton, who prefaced his remark by stressing that many questions remain unanswered.

Some lawmakers urged that the focus remain on building a performing arts

center with public and private money as part of the proposed Renaissance Center.

The mega-project on East Main Street would link the center with a bus terminal and a new Monroe Community College

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Casino

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downtown campus.

"Our plan now is to move forward with MCC and the bus terminal and, as a component of that, the performing arts center," said Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece.

Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks and Rochester Mayor William A. Johnson Jr. were in Albany on Tuesday lobbying for state aid for Renaissance Square. On Wednesday, they were in Washington D.C.

The project would cost more than \$150 million, and local leaders are seeking \$52 million in state aid.

Brooks said she hasn't heard about a casino including a performing arts center, saying it's "a premature conversation."

Robach and others remain interested in a casino to bolster economic development, especially as other gambling venues crop up around the state.

"Downtown as an entertainment center makes a great deal of sense to me," said Assemblywoman Susan John, D-Rochester.

"We have to think of other ways of making it attractive to get people downtown."

But for all the talk, a casino idea is short on specifics and long on bureaucratic obstacles — including Johnson's opposition.

Johnson couldn't be reached for comment Wednesday.

The basic plan would be to knock down the struggling Midtown Plaza and replace it with a casino and a performing arts center, John said.

Other than that, local leaders said they've seen no specifics from its chief backer, Thomas C. Wilmot, chairman of the Rochester-based mall development company Wilmorite Inc.

Wilmot has lobbied politicians for years about putting a casino downtown.



Joseph Robach

says plan is to stick with downtown MCC campus, bus terminal and arts center.



Susan John

"Downtown as an entertainment center makes a great deal of sense to me."

His company owns the Sibley Building across the street from Midtown. The city is suing to recover \$11.5 million in taxes and fees owed on the Sibley Building.

Wilmot also has exclusive development rights in New York with the Oklahoma-based Seneca-Cayuga Tribe, which is embroiled in a land claim dispute in central New York.

If successful, the tribe and Wilmot could leverage a settlement for Native American land in downtown Rochester, according to state legislators.

Wilmot could not be reached for comment.

Because the idea is so preliminary and could require years of approvals, state legislators said they were cautious of it. Moreover, it's unclear whether the construction of a performing arts center as part of the casino would accommodate the needs of the local arts community.

Sarah Lentini, president of the Arts & Cultural Council for Greater Rochester, said she hadn't heard of the casino idea. But she and others would have many questions.

"The county executive and the mayor are just as interested as the arts council is in making sure how the project is planned and making sure it meets the needs of the arts community and the entire community," she said. □

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