

## City invited only pro-casino speakers to lone consultation session

Scheme backfires when small business owner's mind changed by OLG presentations

BY DAVID REEVELY, OTTAWA CITIZEN NOVEMBER 1, 2012



Adam Slight, co-owner of Ottawa Rickshaws, says the more he heard at a city finance committee meeting, the more a casino in Ottawa sounded to him simply like an effort to exploit gambling addicts here instead of letting them be exploited at the Lac-Leamy casino in Gatineau.

**Photograph by:** Jean Levac, Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — An attempt by the city's economic-development staff to salt Tuesday night's casino consultations with business owners who liked the idea backfired when one decided that the more he heard, the less he wanted a casino in town.

Adam Slight, a co-owner of Ottawa Rickshaws, said he thinks he was invited to the evening meeting of city council's finance committee because of a midsummer blog post he wrote that was cautiously optimistic about the idea.

"As for my own 2 cents, I do know one thing: If a good casino were to be built in downtown Ottawa, Ottawa Rickshaws and other entertainment providers downtown would strike jackpot," he wrote. "Many praise the ByWard Market for pursuing a rustic, farmer's market image — but I doubt these people realize that there has been a significant drop in business in the Market over the past several years. A casino would undoubtedly cure this."

A casino would be bad if it were just built to suck money out of problem gamblers' pockets, he wrote, but done well it could "be exciting, promote local culture, hire local performers and restaurateurs, and act as an entertainment hub."

That's what Slight was thinking about when he heard from the city's director of economic development, Saad Bashir, inviting him to go to the one meeting where Mayor Jim Watson said the public would be heard on whether Ottawa should have a casino. "They were looking for businesses that would be for the idea; that's my opinion," he said.

Slight was second on the list of nearly three dozen speakers, which the city clerk's staff assembles in

the order they get requests to speak. He showed up at City Hall and listened to presentations from city officials and executives from the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corp., which was asking the city government for its approval to go looking for bidders who'll make specific proposals on what kinds of casinos they'd like to build where.

It was obvious to him that the politicians had already made up their minds; Watson had urged his fellow councillors to give the OLG the go-ahead a week before the meeting, in fact.

"Why were we invited to come give our position if they already knew what they want?" Slight asked.

He listened to OLG chief executive Rod Phillips and policy director Paul Pellizzari and his heart sank. The more he heard, the more a casino sounded to him simply like an effort to exploit gambling addicts here in Ottawa instead of letting them be exploited at the Lac-Leamy casino in Gatineau.

"These are just two fat cats and it's in their interest to get a casino in another city," Slight said he concluded.

When his turn to speak came, he joined the overwhelming consensus of the public presenters against the casino proposal.

Bashir acknowledged, in an email sent through a spokesman, that he and his department made a point of alerting almost all of those who spoke in favour of the casino idea: "In this case, we notified Ottawa Tourism, the Airport Authority, the Chambers of Commerce and businesses that have expressed interest in the casino report," he wrote. It's just part of the city's "general business practice" of informing stakeholders, he wrote.

Dave Donaldson of the Ottawa Chamber of Commerce and Ann Tremblay of the airport authority were first and third on the list, bookending Slight. Ottawa Tourism's Noel Buckley was seventh. All of them spoke in favour of a casino; Donaldson and Buckley were keen on the idea very early, even quoted in Watson's news release as he announced he himself was for it.

Bashir's list of "stakeholders" doesn't include the addictions workers and community-association spokespeople who showed up in droves to oppose a new casino. Besides Slight, no business owners showed up (at least not to speak on behalf of their businesses), though the executive director of the Bank Street Business Improvement Area did, and representatives of the Rideau Carleton Raceway and the horse-racing industry spoke in support of keeping the gambling and racing businesses together at the track.

Earlier Tuesday, council's finance committee voted to proceed with the redevelopment plans for Lansdowne Park, which is to host a Canadian Football League team after Frank Clair Stadium is renovated. CFL commissioner Mark Cohon flew to Ottawa to speak in favour of the plans — on short notice and at Watson's request, according to Cohon's staff.

"My understanding is the commissioner was called the night before the meeting and invited to come and speak," said league spokesman Jamie Dykstra. It meant the commissioner was on hand to answer councillors' questions about why a football team will survive in Ottawa this time after two previous teams folded. Cohon also added some star power and heft to Lansdowne presentations from city bureaucrats and Roger Greenberg of the Ottawa Sports and Entertainment Group, the city's partner in the redevelopment. He made a point of thanking the mayor publicly for the invitation.

The bureaucracy didn't specifically inform anybody about the Lansdowne debate, Bashir wrote.

The mission to update the OLG's gambling strategy by having more casinos in urban areas is led by the provincial agency's chairman, Paul Godfrey. He's also chief executive of Postmedia Network Inc., which owns the Citizen.

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