

Cleveland officials OK casino parking center, skywalk to Higbee building

Published: Friday, August 19, 2011, 2:56 PM Updated: Saturday, August 20, 2011, 1:23 AM



By Dave Davis, The Plain Dealer



[View full size](#)Rock Ohio CaesarsAn

artist's rendering of the skywalk that will bring casino-goers from a valet parking center into the second floor of the Horseshoe Casino Cleveland in the Higbee Building.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- City officials Friday approved plans for a valet parking operation large enough to serve millions of visitors to a casino being built in the historic Higbee Building. But the fate of the most controversial part of the proposal, a 170-foot overhead skywalk that would connect the parking center to the historic former department store, now rests in the hands of state and federal officials.

Concerned that it would disfigure the building and obstruct downtown views, several members of the Cleveland Planning and Landmarks commissions

have voiced criticism of the overhead skywalk, at times quoting a review by Plain Dealer Architecture critic Steven Litt that it's like "poking a straw in Mona Lisa's nose."

But of the 20 officials from three city panels who gathered Friday at Public Auditorium to vote on the proposed casino welcome center, only one, architect Melanie Boyd, a member of the city's Downtown Design Review Committee, voted against it. Boyd's no vote came after she raised questions about the skywalk.

The glass-enclosed pedestrian bridge, a steel structure clad in aluminum on the top and bottom, would slice diagonally over the intersection of Ontario Street and Prospect Avenue, prompting concerns from some local planners that it would kill foot-traffic in the area because people could easily go from their cars to the casino without going outside.

"We really see the pedestrian bridge as an option for people who want it in bad weather," said City Planning Director Bob Brown, a supporter. But Brown indicated there would be plenty of foot traffic in the area because most people will self-park in one of the nearby lots and walk to the ground-floor casino entrances off Prospect Avenue and Public Square.

Tony Stella, an organizer with the Facebook group "Save Lower Prospect Avenue," questioned the effect the parking center, with thousands of cars coming in and out, will have on cycling in the area. The city's first bike station is about to open on the ground floor of the Gateway North Garage. "Basically, it's almost going to be a freeway," he said.

Craig Wasserman, an architect representing developer Rock Ohio Caesars, told the group that the skywalk probably would open a couple of months after the casino. The Horseshoe Casino Cleveland is slated to open March 26,

becoming the first of Ohio's four voter-approved casinos to offer Las Vegas-style gambling, according to a timeline recently produced by the Ohio Casino Control Commission.



rendering showing the inside of the skywalk that would connect the valet parking center to the Higbee casino

The delay in the skywalk construction is partly because officials for Rock Ohio Caesars, a joint venture between Dan Gilbert's gaming company and Caesars Entertainment Corp., are waiting for the Ohio Historic Preservation Office to decide whether their plan to add a skywalk to the Higbee Building would allow it to continue to qualify for millions of dollars in federal tax credits that were given out in the last several years as the building was renovated.

The state office received the paperwork from the building's owner, Forest City Enterprises Inc., Friday and will make a recommendation to federal officials in the next 30 days on whether the skywalk should affect the tax credits.

"They could say if you do it then we would pull the tax credits," said Ellsworth Grimsley, a Rock Ohio Caesars official, after Friday's meeting. As a

last resort, Rock Ohio Caesars officials say that if the building loses its tax credits the developer would have to compensate Forest City for them to build the skywalk.

Rock Ohio Caesars is leasing four floors of the building from Forest City, which is still reviewing the skywalk proposal. "We need to approve their plan as well," said spokesman Jeff Linton. "And we have not done that yet."

Grimsley added that the developer, if turned down by the state, could appeal the decision to the National Park Service, which oversees the program that provides federal tax credits for the renovation of historic buildings.

"The bridge is an integral part of the development," Grimsley added. "It's what makes the welcome center welcoming."

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