Partners pitch makeover for CNE grounds, Ontario Place

The sprawling waterfront sites of the Exhibition grounds and Ontario Place are being sized up for a radical makeover by one of the players hoping to bring an upmarket casino to central Toronto.

MGM Resorts, with its partner, developer Cadillac Fairview, is stepping up the push for a gambling and entertainment complex at Exhibition Place, arguing the billions in investment could kickstart transit expansion and revive the mothballed Ontario Place.

The vision includes hotel, casino and expanded convention space, along with a standing Cirque du Soleil site, shopping and high-end restaurants combined in a master plan with underground parking. That also could include moving the CNE midway to the northern edge of Ontario Place, executives from Cadillac Fairview and MGM suggested in an editorial board meeting at The Globe and Mail Wednesday.

“We don’t build standalone boxes that have gaming in them,” said Alan Feldman, an MGM vice-president.

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Casino: Developers cite advantages of choosing Exhibition Place

“If you take a look at Casino Rama versus Bellagio, that’s a simple example,” he added. “We build Bellagio.”

A casino complex on the Exhibition grounds will have to contend with some logistical challenges that Las Vegas’s Bellagio doesn’t. It would have to ensure that pigs and cows can make their way to the annual Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, that race cars can still zip around for the Indy, and that there is room for the Canadian National Exhibition.

Those staples, and others like BMO Field, will have to share space with casino and hotel patrons and up to one million square feet of shopping. That would require, the partners say, new transit plans, including an expanded GO station and a bridge or tunnel connecting to nearby Liberty Village.

MGM and Cadillac Fairview don’t rule out the possibility of developing a casino at another Ontario location, including the Buttonville Municipal Airport in Markham – a site co-owned by Cadillac Fairview and set for development. They say they haven’t put significant thought into a backup plan. That’s partly because no other site would be quite as appealing, Mr. Feldman suggested.

“There is an energy that you get from being downtown in any city, and when a city is on the water, there is an energy that you get from being close to the water,” he said.

To have any chance of success, their proposal must win over critics at council, within the community and among users of Exhibition Place. And, the CNE board has said that the annual fair can’t co-exist with a casino.

The partners in the proposed project don’t have much time to bring people on board.

The mayor’s executive committee will consider a staff report on casinos next month, with a decision at council likely coming in early April, where 23 votes are needed to keep the casino question alive. In preparation for those votes, partners MGM and Cadillac Fairview are cranking up their efforts, including launching a website Wednesday that outlines the duo’s ambitions for Exhibition Place and invites the public to click on a link and share their thoughts with their local councillor.

The province last year announced plans to expand gaming and a new casino in the Toronto area is at the centre of that initiative, but it has been clear it won’t force a casino on an unwilling community.

Mayor Rob Ford and his brother, Etobicoke Councillor Doug Ford, say they favour a casino downtown, particularly one on city-owned land such as Exhibition Place, but they are in the minority at this point. Many councillors say they need more information before they can make up their mind, while others have been against any casino from the start.

MGM and Cadillac Fairview say their plan could create between 7,000 and 9,000 permanent jobs, with the average salary topping $60,000. They estimate the project would attract up to a million new visitors to the city each year, who would spend about $1-billion on non-gaming activities. The advantage to the city of choosing Exhibition Place over the Convention Centre site on Front Street (where Oxford Properties is proposing a project that would include enhancing the convention centre and adding a hotel and casino) is that it would revitalize an area that needs it, said Wayne Barwise, executive vice-president of development at Cadillac Fairview.

Also at issue is the city’s take from any casino project. In addition to new investment and an increased tax base, the provincial lottery corporation will pay local government an annual hosting fee. That figure has not been set, but a report by the city manager last fall included a top-end estimate of $168-million – a number that has since been criticized as overly optimistic.

Rod Phillips, chief executive officer of the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corp., said his agency is working with the city to ensure figures are available for the executive committee next month.

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