

Remarks to the City of Detroit's Planning Commission on the Greektown Casino's Request for Re-Zoning to Build it's Permanent Casino April 6, 2006

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the Greektown Casino's plans for permanent expansion.

I am Andrew Koper, an officer with Cityscape Detroit. Cityscape Detroit is Detroit's oldest and largest non-profit group devoted to good urban planning, architecture, the rehabilitation of old buildings, pedestrian friendliness, cityscapes, green spaces, mass transit, urbanism, and the "built environment." More information is available at www.cityscapedetroit.org.

Greektown is a very important part of Detroit, and it's important that the design of the casino expansion respect this.

Greektown is a collection of two and three story, turn of the century, brick buildings and two churches on Monroe Street in Detroit. These buildings are full of restaurants, shops, stores, and bars. They have large picture windows at street level, and colorful signs and banners. The street is well lit, and there are plantings and street vendors. These things get out-of-state tourists and people from all over the city, metro area, and state to drive in, park, walk around, and enjoy. For decades, it has been the only walkable, lively, "urban" street in the city.

The economic, historic, social, and racial importance of this district is hard to overstate.

1. Economically speaking, Detroit is a relatively poor city. Many residents live below the poverty line and there are thousands of vacant buildings and vacant lots. Many outsiders are reluctant to come to Detroit. Greektown is one of the few spots that draws them in to spend money. The restaurants, shops, and bars do a lot of business, create jobs, and contribute tax revenue to the city.
2. Historically speaking, the district is composed of many attractive, turn of the century buildings. The character that these old buildings have is beautiful and irreplaceable. One of the churches in Greektown was a stop on the underground railroad, and the other is a grand, old, Catholic church with turrets, spires and many other unique architectural elements.
3. Socially speaking, again, Detroit is a poor city that is famous for its social problems. Greektown is a bright spot. It is a "cool" area that helps Detroit's reputation in the rest of the metro area and state.
4. Racially speaking, the city of Detroit is mostly black, and the suburbs are mostly white. There is some distance and distrust between the two races. The "coolness" of Greektown transcends this. Greektown isn't "just for white people" and it isn't "just for black people." People of all races go there, mix and have fun.

The large, proposed casino expansion needs to incorporate what makes Greektown special and gives it its value into its design. It has the potential to hurt Greektown.

The casino's expansion should include these five elements:

1. The new structure should be visually appealing at street level. It should have display windows that view into the casino floor; shops and restaurants; and/or are showcases. The street level should be retail stores and restaurants. When people see the expansion from a distance, it should make them want to walk over to it and look at it. It shouldn't be a gigantic, cold, plain structure that stunts human interest.
2. Encourage pedestrianism by casino patrons. Most patrons will drive to the casino, but have many street level entrances to the casino and the hotel/parking expansion. The expansion of the Greektown casino should add to the number of the people on the street and the vibrancy of Greektown, not be completely unnoticeable in that way. The casino surely wants to capture all of its patron's money, but don't keep them completely encased in a giant tomb – make it easy for them to get on the street and walk around Greektown and Detroit.
3. Don't block sidewalks for foot traffic with car parking entrances and exits, curb cuts, and valet parking. This is in two different ways. First, the pedestrianism and lively streets are what give Greektown its value. The casino expansion should not squelch this. Second, Greektown is between several other districts in the city that are growing. The casino expansion should not hinder the flow of foot traffic to and from the central business district to the east; the very popular stadia and theater district to the north; the Renaissance Center and Riverwalk to the south; and Lafayette Park, the Dequindre Cut, and the Eastern Market to the east.
4. Visually break up the mass of the casino expansion. Greektown is what it is because of the small, "human scale" of the two and three story buildings on the street. A 13 story, 3,000 car parking deck is the exact opposite of this. Use different materials, colors, finishes, and textures to make the new building fit in better with its surroundings.
5. Use high quality materials and finishes on the casino expansion. Greektown was built at the turn of the century, and the old brick of the existing buildings has an irreplaceable character. St. Mary's Catholic Church is about a hundred years old and beautiful. The proposed expansion needs to fit in with this, not cheapen and deaden the area.

The Greektown Casino is a large, very profitable business. It had \$336 million in revenue in 2005.

It can afford to pay for these things.

It is important for Greektown, the city of Detroit, and Michigan that the Greektown casino expansion incorporates these elements into its design. As part of Greektown, it should complement and expand the district, not squelch and squash it.

If the new design incorporates these elements, we are in favor of the city allowing re-zoning for expansion.