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LOCATING A CASINO: MUCH AT STAKE FOR HOST COMMUNITY AND REGION

**A POLICY STATEMENT BY THE METROPOLITAN AREA PLANNING COUNCIL
DECEMBER 22, 2011**

The recent press coverage about the Foxborough casino proposal reminds us all that Massachusetts faces some challenging decisions about where to locate up to three casinos, how to maximize the benefits of these developments, and how to address adverse impacts that could be serious and long-lasting. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), the regional planning agency for Metro Boston,¹ believes that the location of a new casino — not just its size or format — will in large part determine its transportation and environmental impacts, secondary economic effects, necessary public infrastructure investments, and social welfare consequences. The process of permitting a casino should involve a clear discussion of likely negative impacts, steps to eliminate or minimize such impacts, and the best approaches to assuring that short and long-term mitigation strategies reflect the priority concerns of the host municipality and the surrounding area.

As we prepare for this process, MAPC would like to provide some advice based on close to 50 years of experience in dealing with the impacts of major developments.

Pursue a transparent public process from beginning to end

MAPC values transparency in public process and community dialogue to ensure respectful, candid and straightforward communication among local stakeholders and casino proponents. Development proposals should be shared publicly as soon as they are ready, and whenever critical details or changes are added. The process should involve not only the local and state agencies whose approval is required; it should also engage the residents of neighboring communities that will be seriously impacted by a casino, but are unlikely to receive any of the new tax dollars. The process should involve a clear discussion of what likely negative impacts will be, how to minimize those impacts, and how to mitigate any impacts that cannot be eliminated. Focusing primarily on what a developer will

¹ The mission of MAPC is to promote smart growth and regional collaboration in Metropolitan Boston. Our work is guided by our regional plan, "[MetroFuture: Making a Greater Boston Region](#)." A critical component of MAPC's mission is to advance equity and cultural competency both internally and in our work throughout the region.

“give” the host community to obtain their support is not the same as a respectful conversation about benefits and impacts, involving both the host and surrounding communities.

Understand and plan for both positive and negative impacts beforehand

Casinos are huge developments, which by their nature bring both positive and negative impacts to a community and to a region. They pay taxes and provide jobs, but they also increase the need for regional road and transit improvements, public safety services, water and sewer infrastructure, and social services. A location needs to maximize economic benefits (in the short term, construction jobs, and in the long term, permanent jobs and tax revenues) while minimizing a host of possible adverse impacts. These negative impacts can include short-term construction disruptions, such as noise, dust, and truck traffic. More importantly, affected communities must also take the longer term view to assure that resources and practices are in place to address:

- increased traffic and transit impacts;
- increased demand for drinkable water and increased production of wastewater;
- storm water run-off, associated pollutants, and changes in drainage patterns;
- stresses on the regional housing stock across a broad range of incomes;
- changing demands for police, fire, and ambulance services;
- location of ancillary business and commercial services nearby, including in some instances services that the community might consider less-than-desirable; and
- an increased need for social services, especially those related to gambling and other forms of addiction.

No location is perfect. All three locations currently in the news in Eastern Massachusetts (Foxborough, Milford, and Suffolk Downs in Boston/Revere) have their pluses and minuses. The recently-approved casino legislation allows local residents in host communities to vote on whether they want the casino; it also allows surrounding communities (if they are determined eligible by the Gaming Commission) to receive reasonable mitigation for adverse impacts, such as the need for road improvements to address traffic. Nonetheless, the characteristics of proposed casino locations will make some sites inherently more suitable than others.

Deal with traffic and transit

In most locations, we must assume that the majority of casino guests, as well as workers, will arrive by automobile. It is critical to determine if the proposed casino can be served by the existing roadway system. Sometimes roads can be adequately improved with mitigation funds from the developer, but in other cases state and federal resources are required to retrofit the roads adequately. Such public resources are very scarce and they are needed to improve travel safety, to ease traffic flow, or to provide transit for thousands of area residents and businesses. Such projects should have a higher priority in implementing the state’s economic development aims.

A hypothetical casino including 175,000 square feet of gaming space, 350 hotel rooms, 30,000 square feet of restaurants, and 30,000 square feet of retail will add some 3,000 vehicle trips during the peak AM and PM commuting times, as well as additional traffic during other times of the day and week.² If some of those trips could be made, instead, by transit or other common carriers, traffic

² Peak Hour traffic generation is based upon *Trip Generation* (7th edition) by the Institute for Transportation Engineers; traffic volume by guests and employees outside of rush hours is much harder to quantify.

impacts for the host and nearby communities would be less onerous. It could also be less costly for taxpayers who would be asked to fund fewer proposals for new interchanges, roadway widening projects, additional traffic signals, etc. There is also strong reason to believe that the presence of a casino leads to an increase in alcohol-related traffic accidents and fatalities.³ Locating a casino that is transit-accessible could not only decrease these types of traffic accidents but also conserve police, fire, and medical resources.

Transit availability is especially important for employees, not only during typical commuting hours, but also at other times of the day and week when casino employees are likely to arrive at and leave work. Out-of-area commutes for employees can increase their costs (negatively affecting workers' incomes) and contribute to traffic congestion. A range of transit options (e.g., subway, trains, buses, and limousine vans) could mitigate traffic generated by guests if it is provided in an appropriate manner and with sufficient frequency. In regard to both roadways and transit (including pedestrian facilities), it is important that any casino developer dedicate adequate resources — both at the time of development and over the longer-term — to appropriately upgrade service without burdening either municipal or state resources.

Think about water as well as cars

Hotels, restaurants, and gaming facilities consume large volumes of drinking water. Looking at examples of other casino complexes, water use can exceed 300,000 gallons per day. A municipal water (and wastewater) system that can handle such use would help to make a location more suitable. Many municipal systems would find it difficult or impossible to meet such a demand without taking extraordinary and costly measures.

Access to a labor force is a distinct advantage

This is especially true if that labor force can provide both high skilled and service workers needed for a casino operation. If the casino is built in an area where few workers currently live, it will require long and costly commutes. Additional residential development may be needed to provide local housing for casino workers in the host and surrounding municipalities. While housing production is usually an advantage for a community, large housing developments in small communities can add service demands. There is also the risk of isolating casino workers and their children in developments that are segregated from the community at large. If adequate housing is not built, for-sale and rental costs could rise. Alternatively, locating such a facility near a concentration of workers may provide an opportunity to help some of our more disadvantaged residents to rejoin the economic mainstream.

In conclusion, MAPC is neither for, nor against, casino gambling. Our members include communities and individuals who support casino gambling, and others who oppose it. However, now that the Commonwealth has adopted a statute governing the siting and regulation of such facilities, the question of where to place a casino in Eastern Massachusetts constitutes a major and complicated civic decision for the state, the host community, and surrounding cities and towns. MAPC stands ready to participate in these discussions to choose the best possible location, and to quantify and address all negative impacts.

³ Buckhurst Fish & Jacquemart Inc. (2001). *Bridgeport Casino Traffic Impacts on the South Western Region of Connecticut, Final Report: July 2001*. (pp. 2-3) New York: Buckhurst Fish Jacquemart, Inc.