

Rival gaming suitors woo Springfielders with glitz

By **Dave Wedge** | Wednesday, December 12, 2012 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | **Local Coverage**

SPRINGFIELD — The ante was upped in the casino battle here last night as Penn National Gaming promised millions in charitable donations, the rehabilitation of a historic theater — and Doug Flutie — while MGM pledged to “unify” the blighted downtown with world-class entertainment in an outdoor mall-style gambling mecca.

“To be a part of your community would be an honor,” MGM CEO Jim Murren said. “You’ve been through so much. And just when you think it’s clearing, you get hit with something else. We think we can help.”

The two gaming giants went toe-to-toe in a community forum at City Stage with slick videos and promises of top-flight entertainment, urban makeovers and jobs galore for a city that’s struggled with unemployment, blight and disaster.

Mayor Domenic Sarno will pick the plan for Springfield but voters will decide if it will be forwarded to the state to compete for the sole western Massachusetts casino license. Proposals have also been floated for Holyoke and Palmer.

Penn National promised that 90 percent of its Hollywood Casino jobs would go to Springfield residents and said there will be six restaurants, including the first by **Boston College** gridiron great Doug Flutie.

“This will be his first restaurant endeavor ever. He’s very excited,” Penn National executive Jay Snowden said.

Penn National will unveil further details at a Dec. 20 “red carpet gala” at the Paramount Theater. The theater would be rehabilitated under Penn National’s plan, which would also include relocating the Springfield Republican newspaper and the Peter Pan Bus transport hub.

MGM would transform a rundown city block into an \$800 million retail, dining and entertainment destination, complete with a hotel, casino, 57-unit apartment building and outdoor mall. Among the planned restaurants is one by Boston celebrity chef Lydia Shire, officials said.

“It would hopefully bring (downtown) back to life,” MGM Springfield president Bill Hornbuckle said.

The two companies, which recently clashed in a high-stakes battle over casino legislation in Maryland, have been ramping up PR efforts as state license application deadlines loom.

Hundreds of residents attended the forum, many of whom raised quality-of-life issues, including crime, addiction and the impact on area businesses. Resident Carol Costa raised concerns about the “ugly” battle between the two companies in Maryland.

“I hope it will be very positive (here) and not contentious in any way,” she said.

Officials from both companies pledged to keep the nastiness at bay.

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