



# ILCAAAP

Illinois Church Action on Alcohol & Addiction Problems

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## Gambling Alert - November 23, 2022



### **How casinos broke their promises to the struggling downtowns of Illinois**

Back in 1992, William Weidner, then president of Hollywood Casino of Aurora Inc., set out to Springfield to kill then-Mayor Richard M. Daley's plans for a \$2 billion "mega-casino" in downtown Chicago. Weidner and other members of what was known as the "riverboat alliance" were worried that any such facility in Chicago would suck away business from their nascent riverboat casinos in Aurora, Joliet, Elgin and other communities downstate. This was an act of self-interest. But that wasn't the language Weidner used.

Instead, he argued that any such casino would run contrary to the intent of the Illinois legislature, which had justified its approval of gambling in Illinois by arguing that these new riverboats would revive the downtowns of communities that were demonstrably struggling with deindustrialization and other economic shifts.

The riverboats were supposed to bring people back to these downtowns and, Weidner argued, if Chicago was allowed to big-foot the whole enterprise, the revitalization of these former industrial cities would either be halted or diminished.

Weidner and his group prevailed, and when the glittering, two-boat Hollywood Casino opened in downtown Aurora in 1993, the pavilion from where the "cruises" commenced featured a gorgeous steakhouse and an epic, Vegas-style buffet? not to mention gleaming display cases showcasing Douglas Fairbanks Sr.'s "Zorro" cape, a Charlie

Chaplin bowler and Charlton Heston's Roman toga from "Ben Hur." At the Paramount Arts Center across the street, the casino booked (and subsidized) Las Vegas-style performances by Liza Minnelli, Dolly Parton, Frank Sinatra and Tom Jones, tailored to high-rollers. A special license was granted to the casino to sell booze until 4 a.m. The people, and the money, rolled in fast.

For anyone who remembers paying just to "cruise" a few hundred feet up the Fox River, downtown Aurora seemed transformed. There was talk of a new riverwalk, hotels, restaurants, condominiums. It seemed that the legislation had gotten it right. Joliet, too, had a popular riverboat and so did Elgin.

All of that is over now. [READ](#)

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