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Casino operators hope to benefit from sports heroes' magic

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PITTSBURGH - When casino operators put forth proposals for a slots parlor and redevelopment projects, they picked a surefire way to win the hearts of city residents - enlisting the support of former sports stars.

Three retired Steelers have lined up behind plans that promise economic growth and a new arena for the Penguins, whose renowned owner, Mario Lemieux, also favors a bid.

Sports analysts and business representatives say the stars - retired Steelers running back Jerome Bettis and Hall of Famers Franco Harris and Lynn Swann - command enormous attention.

"These, to many people, are heroes," said Robert Boulware, manager of external communications at FedEx Ground in Moon Township, which has hosted members of the Steelers at employee rallies.

"To other people, they're incredible icons that, when you look within the region or step on a national stage, they probably have greater name recognition than, say, if you asked, who's the mayor of Pittsburgh?" he said.

Local residents have long embraced professional athletes, particularly Steelers players, who have become influential community members, said Boulware, the team's media relations coordinator from 1994 through 1998.

It's not the first time former Steelers have thrown their weight behind civic, commercial or political interests.

In recent presidential elections, Swann, now a Republican candidate for Pennsylvania governor, campaigned for George W. Bush, while Harris took up the Democratic party's cause. Steelers have appeared in an array of advertisements.

David Carter, a sports business professor at the University of Southern California, said sports stars are increasingly trading on their celebrity status, which "can go a long way, particularly in Pittsburgh."

"The perceived personal connection to the athletes is as strong there as anywhere in the country," he said. "When an athlete does or says something ... people somehow listen. They have a way of breaking down barriers and getting people's attention."

In local markets, athletes are extremely effective at reaching the public, he said.

Nationally, the Steelers have particularly strong appeal, partly because of their Super Bowl winning streak in the 1970s, according to Greg Aiello, a National Football League spokesman.

"The Steelers are certainly one of the top brand names in professional sports, not just in the NFL," he said. "They're as strong a franchise as you can find."

In Pittsburgh, three groups are hoping to clinch the city's sole license for a slots parlor.

Isle of Capri Casinos, of Biloxi, Miss., which has joined forces with the Pittsburgh Penguins, said it will pay \$290 million for a new arena if it wins a state gambling license. Swann has endorsed that effort.

A foundation led by Harris would give more than \$1 million annually in community investments if a proposal by Cleveland-based Forest City Enterprises, which is teaming with Harrah's Entertainment Inc., goes through.

Detroit businessman Don H. Barden, chairman and chief executive officer of PITG Gaming LLC, said his group would contribute \$7.5 million a year over 30 years to help with a new arena if his group secures the license.

That plan is supported by Bettis, who said his involvement is limited to developing the city's Hill District. Motown great Smokey Robinson is also backing the plan.

"From a gaming standpoint, I have no interest and don't want any interest," Bettis said in a telephone interview. "I would hope we get a revitalized city."

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