

Holyoke City Council candidates debate casinos, downtown development and charter change

By [Jeanette DeForge](#)

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HOLYOKE - City Council candidates weighed bringing casinos to the city, discussed downtown development and debated changing the charter in a Thursday night forum.

During the forum, sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, the 13 candidates running for the eight at-large seats answered a variety of questions asked by a media panel. The four running for Ward 1 and Ward 5 squared off by each asking their opponent a question.

School Committee candidates were also included but with just one race between Devin M. Sheehan and James A. Rossmeisl in Ward 5, candidates were given a few minutes to make a statement.

One issue debated several times was the proposal on the ballot to form a charter commission and reduce the size of the 15-member City Council.

Linda L. Vacon asked her opponent for the Ward 5 seat, incumbent John P. Brunelle, why he voted against placing the question of a charter commission on the ballot. She said she supports the idea of reviewing the charter and cutting the City Council.



Linda Vacon

Brunelle said because it would cost \$150,000 to develop the commission, he believed voters should collect the proper number of signatures to get it placed on the ballot. However he said he does agree with cutting the council.

A number of City Council candidates said they supported reducing the size, even though they are all running for the seats. Few offered firm numbers on how many representatives a smaller council should have.

"Getting 15 people to agree on anything is an uphill battle," said Aaron Vega,

a newcomer running for the at-large race.

Most said they would be in favor of legalizing casino gambling in the state but were more divided if a casino should be built in Holyoke.

"I'm all for casino gambling. It would be great in Holyoke," said newcomer William J. Bevan. "Where it could be? I don't know."

Newcomer Jason P. Ferreira said he believed casinos would be a financial drain on restaurants and businesses in the city and said he would prefer to concentrate on attracting manufacturing jobs to the area.

"I don't have strong issues on casinos," said incumbent Rebecca Lisi. "If we could market it as a larger downtown entertainment district, I would support it."



Aaron Vega

Several candidates were also asked questions about revitalizing downtown.

"That is one of my first priorities," said newcomer Rory P. Casey. "There is no one solution to this, I support the library expansion because I think it will help."

Casey said he recently helped organize a downtown block party, which alone will not revitalize downtown but showcases its benefits. He said he and his wife are personally planning to invest in downtown by buying a house there.