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NH Senate panel backs bill to legalize 2 casinos

By NORMA LOVE
Associated Press

New Hampshire's Senate will wait to see whether the House will break a long tradition of rejecting casinos before acting on its own gambling legislation, Senate President Chuck Morse said Tuesday.

Morse, a casino supporter, outlined the chamber's next step after the Senate Ways and Means Committee voted 4-1 to recommend passing a bill that would allow the state to issue two casino licenses. The House has repeatedly rejected casino legislation, most recently last May when it killed a Senate bill that authorized one casino.

Gov. Maggie Hassan has said repeatedly she supports only one casino, which the House proposal would authorize. The House bill is the product of a special commission charged with developing regulations for a future casino.

State Sen. Lou D'Allesandro sponsored the bill the House rejected and the latest Senate effort. He told the committee that New Hampshire desperately needs revenue. His bill would earmark most of the state's profits to road improvements, higher education and economic development.

D'Allesandro, D-Manchester, said he added a second casino license to the latest bill to answer critics who complained last year's bill created a monopoly and was tailored to one location — Rockingham Park race track in Salem.

"I don't gamble. I'm bringing this legislation forward because New Hampshire needs something," he said.

The Lottery Commission estimates two casinos with a total of 5,000 video slot machines and 240 table games would generate \$168 million for the state and about \$480 million for the two license holders when they were fully operating in 2018. The state also would get about \$125 million from application and licensing fees.

The committee approved an amendment to restrict the casinos to a maximum of 1,500 seats for entertainment. D'Allesandro said that is to protect the Verizon Wireless Center in Manchester which has about 10,000 seats.

Jim Putnam testified against the bill for the Granite State Coalition Against Expanded Gambling and Casino Free New Hampshire.

"Any revenue the state might gain from casinos and slot machines will be negated by crime, addiction and social costs associated with expanded gambling," he said.

Kensington Police Chief Mike Sielicki testified against the bill on behalf of the New Hampshire police chiefs association. Sielicki said crime and problems with addiction would rise.

South Hampton Police Chief Eddie Edwards said the state has a poor track record of funding programs it promises to earmark money for and he questioned if the promises in D'Allesandro's bill would be any different.

Ways and Means Chairman Bob Odell, the lone no vote, said over the years casino supporters have said money was needed for all sorts of things.

"This is a Christmas tree distribution system. It's never been about how the money is used. It's, 'We want a casino,'" said Odell, R-Lempster.

But Morse, a Salem Republican, argued legalizing a casino is a non-tax solution for New Hampshire and one that will create spinoff jobs from the economic development resulting from the state having money to finish the expansion of Interstate 93 from the Massachusetts border to Manchester.

"There's more jobs than at one or two casinos," he said.

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