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Gambling in Delaware: Passage near OK on table games

House expected to pass bill next week

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Table games in Delaware are a lot closer to reality today, now that bills have been filed spelling out what games will be allowed, how they will be regulated and how the money will be split.

The House of Representatives is expected to approve the bill next week for quick action by the Senate.

The regulations, made public Friday in the Legislature, include the creation of a commission to resolve disputes, establish a new division of state police and require the hiring of about 40 new state employees, said Mike Barlow, the governor's legal counsel.

The legislation will also finalize how money from gambling will be divided, with 29.4 percent going to the state, 66.1 percent to the casinos and 4.5 percent to the horse racing industry.

The regulations, spelled out in House Bill 310, are expected to gain final approval before the General Assembly leaves for a six-week break at the end of January, said House Majority Leader Pete Schwartzkopf, D-Rehoboth Beach. The House members will get a briefing Tuesday, a public hearing will be held Wednesday and vote could come as early as Thursday, Schwartzkopf said.

A proponent of expanding gambling beyond the three existing racetrack venues, Schwartzkopf said he will not attempt to delay a vote to force consideration of his proposal to expand the number of casinos.

"I sometimes criticize others for not seeing the big picture, and I'm looking at the big picture," Schwartzkopf said. "I'm still going to work toward the additional venues."

The table games legislation, which needs 25 votes to pass the House, has 20 co-sponsors from both sides of the aisle. The additional venues bill only needs 21 votes to pass the House.

Schwartzkopf would not say how many votes he thinks would be in his favor on the expanding revenues bill, but said he is "very close." Schwartzkopf said supporters are trying to persuade members of the Senate to vote for casinos in Wilmington and Sussex County. Gambling is now legal only at Delaware Park, Dover Downs and Harrington Raceway and Casino.

Ed Sutor, Dover Downs CEO, said after the table games bill is signed into law, poker should be available in four months and a full selection of games in six months.

"I feel confident that, if the governor signs it quickly and we get it rolling, we may be able to edge out Pennsylvania and beat them to the punch," Sutor said.

The legislation authorizes any table game that includes cards, dice or a mechanical machine.

The casinos will be responsible for purchasing the equipment and will own the tables, Barlow said, unlike the slot machines that are owned or leased by the state. The state will "heavily regulate" the equipment purchases, Barlow said, specifying such things as where games will be located on the floor of the casino.

After the legislation is approved, Sutor said the three casinos will begin hiring and training the roughly 750 employees that will be needed.

The state will be responsible for screening and issuing licenses to new casino employees, Barlow said. The screenings will be conducted by the newly created Division of Gaming Enforcement in the Department of Safety and Homeland Security.

The division will include an existing group of four state troopers who oversee the slots and will expand to include a total of 10 troopers and five civilian employees, Barlow said.

The division will license employees, oversee security at the casinos and investigate gambling related crimes, Barlow said.

A second piece of legislation, Senate Bill 188, was filed in the Senate by President Pro Tempore Anthony DeLuca, D-Varlano, and makes cheating on the games or using them to launder money a crime.

The state will also hire additional staff in the Department of Finance for accounting and oversight jobs, Barlow said.

The legislation creates a five-person "Lottery Commission" whose members will be selected by the governor and approved by the Senate. In addition to licensing disputes, the commission would be able to hear appeals from people the Lottery Office might ban from the floor of the casinos if they are related to criminal activity. The commission membership will include at least one certified public accountant, one lawyer, one business person, one person with experience in law enforcement, and one public member.

Sen. Liane Sorenson, R-Hockessin, said she is likely to vote against the table game enabling legislation because she has a philosophical opposition to gambling. But she added she has no doubt it will pass.

"It's a regressive form of taxation," Sorenson said. "People who gamble the most are the people who can afford it the least."

The legislation earmarks 1 percent of table game revenues, or \$250,000 if it's more, for treatment programs for compulsive gamblers.
