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Gambling in Delaware: Table games advance in Dover

Senate passes one bill, House set to vote today

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DOVER -- Legislation to legalize table games sailed through two legislative committees Wednesday and half of the two-bill package was approved by the Senate.

The larger portion of the proposals -- House Bill 310, which would legalize the games and establish the tax rate -- was approved by the House Gaming and Parimutuels Committee. The full House is expected to vote on the bill today, with little opposition.

The legislation would legalize table games at the state's three casinos, Delaware Park, Dover Downs and Harrington Raceway and Casino, and is necessary to complete the initial authorization that was passed by the Legislature along with sports betting.

The regulations include the creation of a commission to resolve disputes, the establishment of a new division of the state police and the hiring of about 40 new state employees.

The Senate overwhelmingly approved the second portion, Senate Bill 188, which would make cheating at table games a crime and stiffen penalties on money laundering. The bill received 18 yes votes and one no vote -- by Sen. Colin Bonini, R-Dover South. Sen. Gary Simpson, R-Milford, abstained from voting. Simpson serves on the board of the Delaware State Fair, which owns the majority of Harrington Raceway and Casino, and said he opted not to vote due to a "perceived or actual conflict."

No debate took place on the Senate floor and the hearing in the Senate Judiciary Committee was short. The Senate bill now heads to the House for approval.

The House bill received more attention in its hearing, which lasted more than an hour and mainly included the governor's staff explaining how the implementation of table games will proceed once the legislation is approved.

Rep. Deborah Hudson, R-Fairthorne, expressed concern that the tax rate, which gives the state 29.4 percent of all revenues from table games, was too low.

"I think the state just gets pocket change," Hudson said.

Hudson filed an amendment to raise the state's portion to 47.5 percent, but said she would strike that amendment to prevent jeopardizing the future of the bill.

Rep. Tom Kovach, R-Brandywine Hundred, offered two amendments to the legislation. The first would prohibit lawmakers or their families from being hired for any of the 40 state positions the legislation would create.

Only Rep. Helene Keeley, D-Wilmington West, expressed concern about having lawmakers limit job

holders, given the current economic conditions.

Kovach's second amendment would ensure that all of the money the bill earmarks for gambling-addiction treatment would be spent on those programs.

Kovach said that, currently, money from the state's share of slot machine proceeds that was earmarked for gambling treatment programs has been moved to other programs, like alcohol and drug addiction. He wants to ensure the same doesn't happen to funds for those programs that are generated by table games.

The full House will vote on the amendments when they consider the legislation.
