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## Gambling in Delaware: State House approves table games

Bill expected to pass Senate easily

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DOVER -- Table games were approved by the state House on Thursday evening, sending the slightly amended legislation to the Senate for final approval.

House Bill 310 -- which would establish a tax rate, form an oversight Lottery Commission and provide the final approval for the implementation of table games -- is expected to pass easily through the Senate next week and be signed into law by Gov. Jack Markell.

If that schedule is met, casino patrons in Delaware could be playing poker with real cards and human dealers in April and have a full assortment of games two months later.

The legislation, which state officials estimate will generate more than \$40 million the first year, would create 40 state positions to oversee and regulate the games, and lead to the creation of more than 700 new casino jobs.

Hiring could begin as soon as the legislation is enacted.

The bill was approved with 27 yes votes, five no votes and six members not voting because of perceived conflicts of interest.

Most of the debate focused on an amendment proposed by Rep. Tom Kovach, R-Brandywine Hundred, that would have prohibited lawmakers or members of their immediate families from filling any positions created by the legislation.

Kovach, who called the amendment a "good government" move, argued that a public perception should not be created that lawmakers were creating jobs for themselves.

The amendment was defeated with only eight lawmakers voting in favor. A second amendment by Kovach that would only prohibit lawmakers from filling the positions was approved unanimously.

Lawmakers who opposed the amendment argued that family members might be unfairly barred from getting jobs they were qualified for because of their relation.

"When I first saw it I was offended," Rep. James Johnson, D-Jefferson Farms, said.

Johnson said he worked to overcome racial adversity and his children, "should not be denied anything simply because I'm a state legislator," he said.

Rep. Pete Schwartzkopf, D-Rehoboth Beach, authored the bill and said he opposed Kovach's amendment because it could alter the state's merit system, put in place to protect employees from becoming political casualties in administration changes.

"This bill would trump any merit law out there," Schwartzkopf said.

The no votes on the bill included Reps. John Atkins, D-Millsboro; Ruth Briggs King, R-Georgetown; Gerald Hocker, R-Ocean View; Greg Lavelle, R-Sharpley; and Clifford "Biff" Lee, R-Laurel. Those who opted not to vote because of a conflict were Reps. Brad Bennett, D-Dover South; William Oberle, R-Beecher's Lot; William Outten, R-Harrington; Pam Thornburg, R-Dover West; and David Wilson, R-Talleyville.

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