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Gambling is stimulus bill for lobbyists' lobby

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It's not often we see the Legislature and the governor's office in equal states of befuddledum over a single subject.

In what's turning into the worst fiscal crisis the state has faced -- and remember the Markell credo, "it may get worse" -- instead of dealing with personnel salary cuts, service disruptions and hospital closings, the entire General Assembly and Gov. Markell's administration is tied in knots with how to raise new bucks with increased gambling. But naturally, at least in Delaware, the obstructionists to accomplishing this are -- rim shot, please -- are the existing casino owners.

Of course there are also the various legislative types in Dover with relatives, friends and extended families who have employment connections to the racinos. You won't be hearing these people supporting gambling competition in the state would be healthy for everyone, including the taxpayers.

Then there are those like Speaker of the House Bob Gilligan, a close personal friend of Delaware Park owner Bill Rickman -- who also owns soon-to-be-competition-to-Delaware Ocean Downs in Maryland -- who, by all accounts, has put his public position ahead of his Rickman friendship. At least that's what he's told his Democratic caucus members. A couple years ago, Gilligan was in line for a top shelf executive job at Delaware Park. It never happened.

Then we have Rep. Bill Oberle, who concedes he has a family conflict in this matter because his wife sells trinkets to Delaware Park and his daughter works there.

It's difficult to keep track of the in-laws, cousins and neighbors of legislators who also owe their living to the slots machines. (Forget the ponies. They're going the way of newspapers any day now.)

The House lawmakers, including Majority Leader Pete Schwartzkopf, take great umbrage at the suggestion they are being strong-armed by the Monopoly Three. "I almost couldn't get that bill out of committee," Schwartzkopf said. "I had to agree not to work the bill that night (Tuesday) to get it out." He also says he badly wants a new casino in Sussex like the one planned by Del Pointe in Millsboro.

Schwartzkopf was behind authorizing a study of sports gambling venues outside the Monopoly Three and whether table games are a viable source of income. (Any takers on that study's outcome?) There is also the minor matter of whether they would be constitutional under the existing language. And we're still waiting for a Supreme Court ruling on the legality of what we already have.

The governor wanted the House to pass the bill before the two-week Easter recess so the Senate had a chance at it. That didn't happen. What mysteriously did happen is Schwartzkopf told the governor's office to work out a compromise while the House was on holiday leave. The problem with that, of course, is the governor's office doesn't vote on the bill, or any compromise. The bill is from the governor. If it were up to only him there'd be no compromise (although I think Markell has seen the light about adding three new casinos) and a sports betting bill with 10 free-standing parlors would be on his desk.

But let's not forget the real stars of this legislative ping-pong: the Monopoly Three and the Delaware Lobbyist Stimulus Package. As far as they are concerned they won the first round. And they did it without having to prove their wild, unsubstantiated threats, like having to go bankrupt or out of business if they're forced to pay 8 percent more of their take to the state.

The Monopoly Three used these absurd sob stories to especially influence the uninitiated rookie lawmakers, who apparently are deathly afraid of being blamed for putting Harrington Slots in Chapter 11. Don't worry, guys. You'll see pigs fly first.

But if they really can't make it work on their current revenue, I know a company or two that would be tickled to take the racinos off their hands.
