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Committee to shape sports betting law

Markell signs measure, but wager limits, table games will be decided by panel

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Gov. Jack Markell signed sports betting and table games into law Thursday, but even he can't say yet how much gamblers will be able to bet or which games they'll be able to play.

The law authorizes the establishment of table games, but includes no specifics regarding wager limits, allowable table games, whether competitive events such as poker tournaments will be allowed, or whether such decisions would be up to the state or the individual casinos. Instead, it sets up a committee of representatives from the Controller General's Office, the Department of Finance and the state's three racinos, and gives that group 75 days to negotiate such details. Their proposal will go to the General Assembly for final approval.

At a bill-signing ceremony Thursday at Delaware Park, neither state officials nor casino representatives were showing their cards on the issue, saying that would be determined by the committee.

Though most states with legalized casino gaming do not limit how much gamblers can bet, wager limits have been hotly debated in other states.

In Colorado, casino gaming has been limited to slot machines, poker and blackjack, with maximum bets of \$5. That will change this summer, thanks to a voter-approved initiative that will raise the bet maximum to \$100, allow casinos to operate 24/7 and add roulette and craps tables.

Katy Atkinson, who campaigned for the change in Colorado, said the increase was needed to get Colorado more in line with another state that has a betting ceiling -- South Dakota -- and to increase revenues for the state's community colleges. About 80 percent of the increase in revenues expected from the change will go to the casinos, and most of the remainder to community colleges.

Jon Anderson, a Denver lawyer who opposed the change in the maximum, said the \$5 limit kept gambling recreational and prevented the unwanted side effects of gambling. Anderson said when gambling is only recreational, it doesn't increase crime, alcoholism, addiction or poverty often associated with high-stakes gambling.

Delaware state Sen. Liane Sorenson, R-Hockessin, also worries about the societal impacts of expanding gambling.

She said she's heard from constituents that fear table games could bring an increase in organized crime, more addictions and more crime in communities.

"I thought before we were originally talking about waiting for the next fiscal year and I thought that would be enough time analysis," Sorenson said.

Anderson added that since gambling has been approved in Colorado, larger casino companies have

moved in to pump up the industry. He said the Vegas-style companies have taken away from the original intent of the bill -- to save three small mining towns in rural Colorado -- a parallel to Delaware's initial goal, saving the horse racing industry with slot machines.

Currently, Delaware restricts betting to \$25 per hand on its digital poker and blackjack machines, state lottery director Wayne Lemons said.

At this point, no one has specifically proposed placing a cap on table-game bets, said Tom Cook, with the Department of Finance, but that issue will be among those discussed by the committee as it negotiates regulations on the games.

Cook said the state has studied sports betting extensively in anticipation of it becoming legal, but has done much less research on table games, which only were added to the sports-betting bill late last week.

The 75-day period for table games will allow state officials to research other states' regulations, Cook said.

Delaware Park owner William Rickman Jr. said he does not yet have an opinion on what possible betting limits should look like, but is hopeful the casinos will be given "all the tools necessary" to make table games profitable.

In several other states, including New Jersey, West Virginia and Mississippi, wager limits and the types of table games played have been left up to the casinos.

Allen Godfrey, deputy director of the Mississippi Gaming Commission, said that since commercial casinos were authorized in 1992, the state has never set a bet maximum.

Godfrey said some casinos implement varying limits on specific tables, but that is to keep more serious bettors in separate areas.

Nancy Bulla, spokeswoman for the West Virginia Lottery, said no limits have been imposed in her state. Delaware officials have said they are looking to West Virginia as a model for table games.

Bulla said her state takes steps to make gambling more of a tourist attraction than an activity marketed to only West Virginia residents. For example, racetracks with table games are also required to have hotels with a certain number of rooms, she said.
