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Markell won't give up on sports betting

Casinos make another counteroffer to bill aimed at narrowing budget gap

By *GINGER GIBSON*
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DOVER -- Sports betting isn't going down for the count without a fight.

Gov. Jack Markell remains determined to get legislation that would both legalize sports betting and increase the state's share of slot revenues passed.

"We're going to keep fighting, and I believe we're going to get this bill through," Markell said Wednesday. Markell said the new gambling revenues are an integral part of his budget proposal and without them, more cuts would have to be made in other areas.

Heavy hitters from the state's three casinos still were lobbying in Legislative Hall on Wednesday, a day after their victory in the House, where the bill to reauthorize sports betting died two votes short.

Representatives of the state's three casinos say they've made another counteroffer, a package they say will give taxpayers more money without hurting the casinos bottom lines.

Markell said his office will continue to negotiate with the casinos on a compromise that would be fair to taxpayers without rushing the administration into additions they're unprepared for, like the immediate addition of table games.

Ed Sutor, CEO of Dover Downs, said they submitted their sixth counterproposal to Markell, a plan that would, among other things, impose a lower tax on Harrington Raceway and Casino. Many lawmakers cited concerns this week about the financial health of that operation.

The proposal also includes quick implementation of table games, a point the governor's office said needs further study to determine how they will be regulated.

Markell's office said it has made four counteroffers to the casinos, adding that quantity didn't necessarily equal quality.

As the back and forth continues, tensions over the power of the state's three casinos nearly reached a breaking point on the floor of the House.

House Minority Leader Richard C. Cathcart, R-Middletown, extolled Wednesday the "irresponsible" comments made by the governor tying sports betting to state workers' pay.

After an exchange with House Majority Leader Rep. Peter Schwartzkopf, the bill's sponsor, Cathcart said he wasn't seeing enough communication across the aisle toward Republicans from the governor.

"We want to be participants in this and thus far we haven't been called to participate," Cathcart said. "And to expect that we're going to resolve a \$750 million budget problem without this side of the aisle

participating in it and making comments like this, and if he thinks he's going to get [this done] easily, he's crazy."

"These are serious times that require serious solutions," Markell said. "I'm not going to take those comments seriously."

Time ticking down

Markell also said he had offered members of leadership, including Cathcart, to visit their caucus on Tuesday afternoon before the vote.

He said Cathcart did not take him up on the offer, and added that he met with the Republican caucus in March, the first gubernatorial visit to the group since Republican Gov. Pete du Pont. Markell said he met with House Democrats on Tuesday.

Markell also met with Senate Democrats on Wednesday, part of his effort to gain support for his budget package and hopefully reinvigorate his sports betting push.

The Legislature only has five working weeks left to iron out a budget, plus two weeks of budget markups, before the June 30 deadline.

Markell submitted a letter to the State Supreme Court on Wednesday in response to a letter his office received last week from the court saying it could not rule on the constitutionality of sports betting until after the bill passed.

Markell again asked for an opinion, saying he expects the legislation to be approved by May 14.

Markell said while continuing to push for the gambling revenues, work also is continuing on the rest his package.

Chief of Staff Tom McGonigle said legislation for the list of tax increases -- the franchise, gross receipts, utility, alcohol and tobacco -- will be filed in three weeks after the Legislature returns from a two-week Joint Finance Committee break.

State workers rally

The "other" headline in Markell's budget proposal -- pay cuts and health insurance increases to state workers -- has not been pushed aside by the gambling debate. Rather, it has been magnified by it.

Hundreds of state workers rallied Wednesday outside Legislative Hall, with many expressing concern that the failure of the sports betting bill would leave them vulnerable to deeper pay cuts.

Rod Fesel, 32, of Dover, carried a sign reading, "Find another way, don't take teacher pay."

Fesel, a fourth-grade teacher at Hartley Elementary, said the sports betting legislation should have been something to not only ease, but eliminate, the burden being placed on state workers.

"I would have loved to see them pass that," Fesel said. "Markell had already banked on that going through. Now you've got to recalculate."

But Lisa Whiteman, 37, of Dover, said she doesn't think sports betting was the magic bullet, and because she has a sister who works for one of the casinos she's happy to see that it died.

"It would have stretched [gambling] out too much," Whiteman said.
