

# Gambling bill's opponents still fighting

Casinos, NFL likely to continue lobbying in Senate

BY GINGER GIBSON • THE NEWS JOURNAL • MAY 9, 2009

---

Delaware is 14 votes away from becoming the first state east of the Mississippi River to allow sports betting. It would also be one of a handful to allow table games.

After a strong push by Gov. Jack Markell in the House, the measure -- legalizing table games, authorizing sports betting and increasing the state's share of gambling revenues -- heads to the Senate amid the dissenting roars of the NFL, NCAA and the state's three casinos.

Less than a year ago, a proposal that would have legalized sports betting never saw a Senate vote after then-Gov. Ruth Ann Minner vowed to veto the bill if it passed.

This version was rejected Tuesday in the House before hours of negotiations led to an agreement and passage, by a 30-4 vote, early Friday.

Brokering hinged on getting House Republicans to sign on and included several concessions. The increase in the state's share was lowered from 8 points to 6.5 points, the licensing fee was dropped from \$4.5 million to \$4 million and table games were authorized "as soon as possible."

Not everyone was pleased with the compromise. Casino representatives said the bill fails to address their concerns, and Laird Stabler, a lobbyist for the NFL, said early Friday that the pro sports leagues will continue to oppose the legislation as long as sports betting remains in the language.

It's not clear yet if the same fight could play out in the Senate.

Senate President Pro Tempore Thurman Adams, D-Bridgeville, began saying he expected sports betting to be approved this year even before Markell won the primary. Standing trackside at the State Fair in July, Adams said after Minner left, the last barriers would be removed.

Adams sits on the board of directors for the State Fair, which owns a majority share of Harrington Raceway and Casino, and is an honorary member of the racetrack's board of directors. Adams is expected to abstain from voting when the bill hits the Senate floor, but will still decide when the bill is heard and which committee will consider the legislation.

His counterpart across the aisle, Senate Minority Leader Gary Simpson, R-Milford, also sits on the board of directors of the State Fair and said he will not vote on the bill. But that won't stop him from being involved in negotiations or speaking on the Senate floor during debate.

Senate Majority Whip Patricia Blevins, D-Elsmere, said she anticipates the sports betting bill will be voted on in the Senate by the end of next week, after which the Legislature breaks for two weeks to allow the Joint Finance Committee to consider the budget.

"I don't want this to drag," Blevins said. "The members of the Joint Finance have a lot to do and they don't need to be distracted."

She said no one has conducted a straw poll and is unsure if the support of Harrington-area lawmakers in the House -- such as Rep. Robert Outten, R-Harrington, who voted in favor of the bill on Friday -- could signal a similar move by southern Senate members.

"What we're seeing is a recognition that we need the revenues and if we don't pass some form of this bill, then we're going to have a much higher hill to climb to get to a budget on June 30th," she said. "The state of the revenue has really driven the success of sports betting. I think the casinos make out pretty well with this bill. We have addressed every issue they've brought up. I shouldn't say we, the House of Representatives has addressed every issue they brought up."

Blevins said she will vote in favor of the bill, meaning only 13 more senators are needed to approve the legislation.

Only three other states can hold sports betting under federal law -- Nevada, Montana, which runs a small program where people can bet on fantasy football, and Oregon, which discontinued its program.

As the fight in Dover garners national attention, other states are trying to get their piece of the sports betting attention.

New Jersey Rep. Ray Lesniak, D-Union, filed a lawsuit in March asking a federal court to overturn the law that grants Delaware an exemption from an otherwise nationwide sports betting ban.