



June 25, 2009

Sussex racino bill clears hurdle

By J.L. MILLER and DAN SHORTRIDGE
The News Journal

DOVER -- Backers of a proposed Sussex County racino project won a victory Wednesday in the state House, keeping alive the chance the casino could get its license before year's end.

A bill to grant the project its casino license had stalled in the House Revenue and Finance Committee, but House Majority Leader Peter Schwartzkopf, D-Rehoboth Beach and a proponent of the \$550 million, 377-acre Del Pointe project near Millsboro, rounded up enough votes to force it out.

He then tabled the bill, telling the House that he had no intention of working it before the Tuesday adjournment deadline.

Schwartzkopf said it had been his intention from the beginning to have House Bill 194 ready for debate in a special session expected to be called this fall to address table gaming.

However, the bill hit a stumbling block when the committee chairman, Newark Democrat Rep. John Viola, D-Forrest Knoll, did not place it on the agenda for a hearing.

Schwartzkopf was furious at the action, saying it stood in the way of a project that could mean 1,000 jobs to Sussex County.

But the majority leader found sufficient support to muster 22 votes -- one more than needed -- to force it from committee.

Del Pointe developer Preston Schell hailed the move, adding that it "also gives [legislators] the opportunity, late at night on June 30, if they're looking around for 20 million bucks, to say this makes a lot of sense."

If they win approval for slots, Schell and partner Gene Lankford have pledged a \$20 million prepayment this budget year toward the \$75 million they estimate the casino will generate for Delaware coffers annually.

"We're very excited this happened," Schell said, thanking the union members and supporters of Del Pointe who have come together and lobbied for the project.

The future study on the impact of additional slots venues should take a broad view of the issue, Schell said.

Instead of looking at the effect on the three existing venues, the committee should ask about the impact on Delaware as a whole -- the state revenue and the thousands of jobs that would be created during construction and full operation, Schell said.

"If the question that's asked is, 'Does Del Pointe take a little bit of revenue from other private enterprises' -- i.e., Harrington Raceway -- that's not the right question to ask in a capitalist society," he said.