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## Millsboro, Wilmington eye new casinos

### Bill to authorize new venues gets support in city and Sussex

By *GINGER GIBSON*  
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DOVER -- Wilmington and Millsboro seem like the most unlikely of political allies.

But lawmakers from New Castle and Sussex counties are teaming up as a coalition to strengthen the push for new casinos in Delaware, one in each county.

Rep. Pete Schwartzkopf, who is supporting Del Pointe in Millsboro to open a casino, got a new set of backers -- lawmakers from Wilmington who think the city deserves a venue, too.

It's the first time upstate and downstate legislators have publicly joined forces on the issue.

"I'm supporting anything in terms of the economy and keeping jobs," said Rep. Dennis P. Williams, D-Wilmington North. "If they support Wilmington, I'm going to support them."

And Schwartzkopf, D-Rehoboth Beach, said he's got no opposition to a Wilmington location.

Between Williams, who co-chairs the budget-controlling Joint Finance Committee, and Schwartzkopf, who serves as House majority leader, lawmakers think the chances of new venues are getting better.

Schwartzkopf's bill to authorize Del Pointe now has an amendment that would give Wilmington the go-ahead. It has seven co-sponsors, some of whom don't even represent the city of Wilmington.

One sponsor, Rep. Gerald Brady, D-Wilmington, said that by combining the issue as both Wilmington and Sussex County, they should be able to pull in more support from lawmakers whose districts might not be directly affected.

"Now it's something that impacts a broader area, more constituencies, and therefore has the ability to reach more individual legislators," Brady said.

Slot machines, sports betting and table games are limited by law in Delaware to the three established racetrack casinos: Delaware Park, Dover Downs and Harrington Raceway.

When the notion of new venues was floated in January, lobbyists for the current three racinos came out in force, curbing initial efforts.

Officials from the three venues have consistently opposed any new locations, saying they would hurt their revenues and not provide a significant increase in the state's revenues.

"It's like many other businesses, if there is a profit to be made you're going to want to protect your interests," Brady said.

But Brady said by bringing two groups of lawmakers together, they may be able to overpower the casino lobby.

Brady and Williams said they're supporting the Wilmington proposal because of economic benefits. Unlike the push to give Sussex a casino, neither lawmaker is set on a particular site.

Del Pointe is a proposed \$520 million resort and casino located less than 30 minutes from Delaware beaches. It would include a mile-long harness racing track, a hotel, a water park and indoor sports facilities. It would also house shopping and restaurants, perks Schwartzkopf said would draw from the more than 7 million people who visit Delaware's shore each year.

Williams said a site near the Wilmington Riverfront could provide an ideal location because most of the infrastructure is already in place. Brady said selecting a location could become a competitive process.

Williams said he was initially reluctant to expand gambling given the possible social woes, but now he sees it as a necessary step to create jobs, stay competitive with surrounding states and keep the budget in balance.

The official word from the governor's office is that they're waiting for a study that was commissioned when the Legislature legalized sports betting.

The administration "is reserving judgment on whether we should have additional venues and where they should be," said Joe Rogalsky, press secretary for Gov. Jack Markell.

Markell originally supported adding venues when he made the proposal in March, then dropped the idea in a compromise to get votes for sports betting.

Since then, the economic potential of sports betting has been sharply curtailed by a ruling against Delaware in federal court, limiting the state to parlay bets that require a wager to be placed on at least three separate pro football games.

Many politicians assume that Markell would throw his support behind another proposal to expand gambling venues.

A commission studying the impact of any new venues held a subcommittee meeting Thursday to discuss hiring a consultant.

Only two members of the subcommittee showed, Schwartzkopf and Sen. Nancy Cook, D-Kenton, as well as two commission members who aren't part of the subcommittee, Chairman Dennis Rochford and Acting Finance Secretary Tom Cook.

But the discussion about hiring a consultant quickly devolved into a dispute about whether new venues are a good idea, with Nancy Cook and Schwartzkopf taking opposing sides.

The dispute began over whether the consultant should consider specific proposed plans for casinos or only generalities. Cook said the study should not evaluate specific sites.

Schwartzkopf said it would be impossible to ignore them, especially since Del Pointe is nearly shovel-ready.

Cook then attacked Del Pointe.

When Schwartzkopf said Del Pointe already has a horse racing license, he drew a few mumbles from the casino lobbyists.

"That's a joke," Cook shot back. She would not explain her comment.

When Dover Downs CEO Ed Sutor spoke during the meeting's public comment section, he also pointed out that Del Pointe has a "conditional" license.

Schwartzkopf later said some have accused the Del Pointe developers of lying to the Harness Racing Commission to obtain their credential because they didn't declare at the time they were interested in operating a casino.

Preston Schell, who is developing the Del Pointe project, said the attacks against its license come from people trying to undermine the project.

Schell said the license was issued in August 2008, provided the developer built a track and met a few basic requirements within three years. He said unless Del Pointe fails to meet a few objective requirements by the 2011 deadline, he's been assured the license can't be revoked.

Schell said Cook is "just looking for any excuse to question our license or throw a wrench in our plans."

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