

St. Charles officials still undecided on video gambling

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By [James Fuller](#)

The arguments for and against allowing video gambling in St. Charles Monday night were predictable. And the odds of aldermen embracing a topic they wouldn't even discuss just a year ago seemed slim.

Turned out they were better than zero. There was no clear consensus by aldermen, except for perhaps continuing the conversation to allow more investigation of the social and financial impacts to the city.

Staff members' initial projections showed 74 businesses with operations and/or licenses that would allow them to apply for video gambling machines.

With a maximum of five machines per establishment, lifting the city's ban would open the door to the possibility of 370 machines out of the gate.

Using the average state payout, per machine, to the host municipalities, city Finance Director Chris Minick estimated the city would earn between \$174,000 and \$695,000 per year. Those numbers, and the call for the machines from local businesses, were enough to earn support for lifting the ban from Mayor Ray Rogina.

"I trust we can manage it properly," Rogina said. "And I am very skeptical about St. Charles' image being tainted. I am not in the mood to support more increases in taxes."

But only Alderman William Turner joined Rogina in firm support for ending the ban.

"It's legal," Turned said. "And I don't believe in nanny government."

Aldermen Ron Silkaitis, Rita Payleitner and Maureen Lewis all spoke in favor of keeping the ban in place, mainly because of concerns about addiction. Alderman Steve Gaugel said he didn't want to increase the city's reliance on any funds or programs administered or controlled by the state.

Aldermen Todd Bancroft, Ed Bessner and Art Lemke spoke in favor of getting more information and continuing the discussion. And that's what aldermen ultimately decided. They'll take the topic up again on Aug. 17.

The decision followed an hour of seesawing public input from gambling opponents and local businessmen who want the machines.

Fears of addiction, broken families and suicide dominated the comments from opponents. Melynda Litchfield is a spokeswoman for Stop Predatory Gambling. She also happens to be a St. Charles resident. She moved to the city, in part, to help escape her own addition to slot machines. It's an addiction, she said, she never saw coming, and yet it also nearly ruined her life. She told aldermen bringing video gambling to the city would create that same scenario and worse for many of their constituents.

"I implore you to not make St. Charles and its citizens collateral damage," Litchfield said. "Please maintain this town as it was always meant to be -- like your signs say, a No. 1 place for families."

But at least half the people in the audience were local restaurant owners or one of the more than 1,700 members of St. Charles' Moose Lodge. They all said the city's ban on video gambling doesn't do anything to eliminate gambling addiction. What it does do, they said, is put their businesses and organizations at a competitive disadvantage. St. Charles is one of only five Kane County municipalities with a video gambling ban in place.

"Some people are addicted to smoking, to drinking, to drugs," said Pat Strader of the Moose Lodge. "You're never going to cure peoples' addictions by telling them 'no.' They are going to go wherever they want to get what they need."

Mark Hoffman, owner of the Second Street Tavern, agreed. He said video gambling would be a small part of his business.

"Five machines is not going to turn any restaurant into a casino," Hoffman said. "The problems that have been described don't really exist from the people I've talked to."