

Local congressman keeps up push to legalize some online gambling

Thursday, Oct. 04, 2012

By Anna M. Tinsley

atinsley@star-telegram.com

Anti-gambling forces called on U.S. Rep. Joe Barton Thursday to throw in the cards on his plan to legalize online poker.

Opponents of the proposal fear that Barton's controversial bill - which has lingered in the U.S. House for more than a year - may find movement now that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has sought to push the measure forward in the waning days of this congressional session.

And they worry that legalizing online poker could lead to further expansion of gambling in Texas.

"We see this bill as the camel's nose under the tent - a beginning point for gambling online," said Jack Ballou, a board member of the anti-gambling Stop Predatory Gambling-Texas group and an Arlington resident. "As a constituent, ... (I'm) calling on Congressman Barton to withdraw support of that bill and discontinue pushing it in Congress."

Barton, R-Ennis, said earlier this year that even though time is running out in this session, he's still talking to colleagues, hoping to legalizing the estimated \$6 billion online poker industry by creating interstate licensing.

"Poker isn't predatory gambling - it's the All American game and Texas Hold'em is a natural for Texans to play," Barton said. "In fact, I learned to play in Boy Scouts. It is a game of skill, not one of chance."

Barton's proposal has drawn a variety of sponsors from both parties as well as support from the poker-playing industry.

Recently, Reid has talked about a bill that would ban all types of online gambling except for Internet poker. His proposal also would let state and tribal lotteries sell online tickets - something else gambling critics oppose.

The Stop Predatory Gambling-Texas group sent Barton a letter this week asking him to back off the bill.

"We oppose expansion of gambling in Texas," said Stephen Reeves, a lobbyist with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission. "What we are afraid of is that the Texas state Lottery will look to the example of other states in moving to the Internet. We don't want the state to go down that road either.

"We oppose the expansion of gambling," he said. "We don't want gambling through the internet going into every home, office and smart phone through the country."

The proposal

"People are playing poker on the internet for money in the United States today," Barton said. "They are playing on overseas sites that are outside the reach of U.S. law - leaving the consumer unprotected and the government without the ability to tax the winnings."

Barton said his bill would create a program in the Department of Commerce that would let states be licensed for Internet poker. He said it would protect players and state's rights - and give participating states a share of any revenue generated.

Under his plan, state officials would decide whether or not to allow online poker in their state as well as provide fair games, screen out underage players, block players from non-participating states, ensure tax collection and more. Participating states would have to develop a compulsive gambling program and would not be allowed to accept Internet bets on sporting events or games other than poker.

"The reality is that Texans, and Americans broadly, will continue to play online poker whether federal lawmakers pass legislation or not. That won't change," said Matt Allen, Texas' assistant state director for the Poker Players Alliance. "What can change is passage of thoughtful legislation to protect consumers - both those who play, like the tens of thousands of Texans who enjoy online poker, and those who shouldn't be playing, like problem gamblers and minors.

"Today, those safeguards don't exist, so I am baffled as to why any citizen would stand in the way of this much needed legislation."

Opposition

Delaware earlier this year became the first state to sign on to legal online casino gaming when the governor approved a law allowing websites that offer slot machines, blackjack, roulette - and poker.

Officials there, and in other states considering similar moves, say the door was open to legally allow online gambling because of a Justice Department ruling last year.

That ruling addressed the Wire Act of 1961, which restricts betting over telecommunications systems that cross state or national borders. In a departure from previous rulings, the department last year said the act applies only to sports betting.

Critics fear Barton's bill could open the door to too many unknowns including whether players are old enough to play or can afford to gamble.

"This is not just about poker," Reeves said. "This is about getting gambling on the Internet.

"We're worried about the rate of problem gamblers going up," he said. "We are worried about kids getting on there and gambling because there's no way to verify their age."