



Massachusetts Gaming Commission seeks ways to include casino opponents in planning process

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By Dan Ring, The Republican

BOSTON - Members of the **Massachusetts Gaming Commission** are pledging to include anti-casino activists in a future public event, but will limit critics to the sidelines for its first public forum Thursday in Boston.

A couple of **casino** foes are criticizing the commission for launching Thursday's scheduled public forum with a leader of the commercial gaming industry.

But at least one other top casino opponent, **former attorney general L. Scott Harshbarger**, said it is essential for opponents to work with the commission as it develops the state's casino industry.

Frank J. Fahrenkopf, president of the **American Gaming Association** in Washington, is set to speak about "the state of the gaming industry" during the commission's day-long "Educational Forum on Casino Gaming: Best Practices and Lessons Learned" at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center. The forum is open to the public.

"It's framed as a public educational forum and they are bringing in America's top lobbyist for the casino industry," said Les Bernal, executive director of **Stop Predatory Gambling**, who co-authored a letter to the commission with **John Ribeiro , of Winthrop**, who is working to block a casino proposed for the Suffolk Downs horse track in Boston.

Fahrenkopf's appearance is "the equivalent of inviting the top lobbyist for The Tobacco Institute, once the national lobbying organization for the tobacco companies, and presenting him to the public as a credible source of information about the actual impact of the tobacco industry," the letter said.

Karen Schwartzman, spokeswoman for the **commission**, defended the invite for Fahrenkopf.

"As the chief executive of the American Gaming Association, **Frank Fahrenkopf** has an

important perspective that the commission needs to hear," Schwartzman said. "It's incumbent upon the commissioners to hear all perspectives as they go about their work."

The forum on Thursday will also include panelists from the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board and former New Jersey gaming commissioners who will talk about lessons they learned when putting casinos into effect in those states.

Click [here](#) to view the agenda for the forum.

The commission was created in the state's casino law, passed by the state Legislature and signed in November by **Gov. Deval L. Patrick**. The commission is responsible for licensing, overseeing and regulating all expanded gambling in the law, which authorizes a slot facility and up to three casino resorts in different geographic zones, including one for anywhere in Western Massachusetts.

Several casinos are in the works for Western Massachusetts, including one by **Ameristar Casinos of Las Vegas** for Page Boulevard in Springfield and another by the **Mohegan Sun of Connecticut** for Palmer.

Stephen P. Crosby, chairman of the commission, said he would like to include in a future forum former attorney general Harshbarger or David D'Alessandro, former CEO of John Hancock Financial Services, who both have pressed for an independent analysis of the costs and benefits of casinos. Crosby said he is also talking to casino opponent Kathleen C. Norbut of Monson about being on a panel at a future event to discuss ways to mitigate the effects of casinos on communities.

"Any legitimate view that we might learn something from – pro, con or in the barrel – we'll be talking to," Crosby said.

In an e-mail, Harshbarger said it's a good thing for opponents to be involved in the gaming commission's process.

"We are aware that we cannot change the legislative vote," Harshbarger wrote in an e-mail to The Republican. "That issue, at least in the short-term, is decided. Rather, our focus will be ensuring that the Commonwealth will be fully prepared for the harm to our economy, our cities and towns that casino culture will bring about. We view our role as helping the commission consider, plan for and mitigate the negative impacts that gambling has upon the general health, welfare and safety of our citizens."

Harshbarger said the commission's work must start with a "truly independent" study of the costs and benefits of casinos.

"It is incumbent on the Commission to consider the good, bad and ugly of casino gambling as it weighs the proposals in Massachusetts," Harshbarger wrote. "I think to date, we have seen Crosby and the Commission to be people of substance who are doing and saying the right things about wanting to do this the right way."

Crosby said the commission will not revisit the long debate about whether casinos should be permitted in Massachusetts.

"We've been clear about that from our very first meeting," Crosby said. "If somebody wants to come in and tell us we shouldn't have casinos, we don't have time for that."

Crosby said he wants to hear from Harshbarger or other people who have debunked prior studies that generally heralded the jobs and revenues from casinos.

Crosby said he will listen to criticism of state-financed studies in 2010 by the Innovation Group of Littleton, Colo. and in 2008 by Spectrum Gaming Group of New Jersey and a study funded by the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce in 2008.

Crosby said critics have said the studies are unreliable.

"We will want to hear from people who say that," Crosby said. "We don't know if they were good or not."