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Opponents object to casino industry lobbyist speaking at public forum

State commission defends its choice

By *Mark Arsenault*

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Casino opponents have sharply criticized the state gambling commission's choice of a prominent casino lobbyist to be the keynote speaker at the commission's first public educational forum on the industry, planned for next week.

The panel's choice of Frank Fahrenkopf, president and chief executive of the American Gaming Association, was a mistake, according to the national nonprofit organization, Stop Predatory Gambling.

"Mr. Fahrenkopf and other representatives of the commercial gambling business have plenty of financial resources to continue misleading the public about the impact of casinos, but they should have no place at a government-sponsored public education forum," Les Bernal, executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling, wrote in a letter to the state gambling commission. The letter was co-signed by John Ribeiro, an outspoken opponent of casino plans at Suffolk Downs in East Boston.

Fahrenkopf, a lawyer, is former chairman of the Republican National Committee, serving from 1983 to 1989. He is one of the best-known national spokesmen for commercial casinos, appearing frequently on casino issues in news stories and on television news programs. He is scheduled to deliver an analysis next week on the state of the casino industry.

Inviting "the nation's leading casino advocate" to deliver a high-profile speech at a public forum "is the equivalent of inviting the top lobbyist for the Tobacco Institute . . . and presenting him to the public as a credible source of information about the actual impact of the tobacco industry," Bernal wrote.

Stephen Crosby, chairman of the gambling commission, acknowledged at Tuesday's commission meeting that the panel had received the complaint, but said it was "entirely appropriate" to have an official such as Fahrenkopf speak at the forum.

"It is incumbent upon us to hear all perspectives as we are learning," Crosby said.

The panel, created under the casino legislation signed into state law in November, also intends to hear from gambling opponents as it works to craft regulations that will govern the industry, said Crosby. The panel will hear from “any legitimate voice” with expertise that can help educate the commissioners, he said, though “if somebody wants to come in and tell us we shouldn’t have casinos - that we’re not going to do.”

The May 3 forum at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center is first of what the commission expects to be a series of public symposiums, he said. Other forums may cover the economic effects of casinos or how casino developers can reduce possible negative effects on local cities and towns.

The first forum will cover “best practices” in the casino industry and “lessons learned in gaming administration, regulation, and enforcement,” according to the commission’s website. The public is invited to attend.

Fahrenkopf, through a spokeswoman, declined to comment on the objection to his appearance at the forum.