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Budget writers tackle casino bill

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CONCORD – The state stands to lose \$150 million of existing tax receipts to Massachusetts casinos if efforts to expand gambling in New Hampshire sit idle.

That was the warning from the state Senate’s chief budget writer Monday, a message that was countered by the leader of the Granite State Coalition Against Expanded Gambling, who argued new casinos would decimate gaming profit for local charities.

Opponents and supporters plowed no new ground, however, as a key House committee took nearly three hours of testimony on an altered bill, HB 593, that would make four casinos legal. Rep. Stephen Stepanek, R-Amherst, said the House Ways and Means Committee will again give a thumbs up or down to this measure Feb. 21.

In November, it became the first House policy committee ever to endorse casino gambling; similar bills cleared the Senate on numerous occasions.

The most active company pursuing a casino here, The Millennium Group, wants it located at a \$450 million, renovated Rockingham Park in Salem.

That’s the hometown of Senate Finance Chairman Chuck Morse, R-Salem, who said the state’s existing tax structure is at stake.

“Our taxpayers and small businesses carry too great of a tax burden,” Morse said. “In doing nothing and not passing HB 593, New Hampshire is at the risk of losing revenue that we have already, losing \$150 million in revenue from the state.”

Morse presided over helping to write the existing state budget that pared 12 percent in state spending.

Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick signed a state law legalizing three casinos and one slot machine parlor. The closest declared site to the New Hampshire border would be at Suffolk Downs race tracks in Revere, 50 minutes away.

Jim Rubens, with the anti-gambling group, said having casinos closer would destroy church and nonprofit groups that make big money from already-legal gaming such as bingo and small stakes poker games.

“It will be the nearby New Hampshire casinos that will hurt charities by offering the same type of gambling as charities, but with higher betting limits and a lower tax rate than the casinos,” Rubens said.

Republican Executive Councilor Raymond Burton, of Bath, has kept a low profile on this issue in the past, but came out Monday in support.

“The North Country needs jobs. We need economic investment that will attract tourists to our region,” Burton said.

The original bill called for two megacasinos with up to 10,000 slot machines apiece, and all speculation turned to Salem getting one and the Greenmeadow Golf Course property in Hudson getting the other.

Stepanek agreed to an amendment, carving out two smaller casinos for economically distressed parts of the state; qualifying regions are the North Country and Hinsdale-Winchester area that was home to a dog track that closed a few years ago.

Les Bernal of Stop Predatory Gambling, a national group, said supporters are kidding themselves by thinking New Hampshire would ever be a destination casino locale.

Instead, the customers will come from local residents visiting the site several times a week, which Bernal argued would create a corrosive habit that for individual gamblers becomes much more addictive than alcohol.

“For anyone who compares gambling to having a beer, no sip of beer has ever promised me a lifetime of riches,” Bernal said.

This campaign is likely to go on past this 2012 legislative session. Gov. John Lynch’s threat to veto any casino gambling bill all but assures one cannot become law, at least until after he leaves office in December.

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