

# Casino Bill's True Believer Enters the Final Stretch

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It took 20 years for State Representative Lou Lang, one of Illinois' most outspoken politicians, to convince his colleagues to support more gambling in Illinois.

Now he faces a tougher challenge: convincing Gov. [Pat Quinn](#), who campaigned against any large-scale expansion of gambling.

"I have a very good relationship with the governor," Mr. Lang said. "Long ago when he was state treasurer, I handled a lot of his bills at a time when he was thought of as a person outside the mainstream of politics. Lots of people didn't want to be helpful to him. I was."

Mr. Lang, 61, hopes his relationship with Mr. Quinn will tip the balance in his favor, even though the governor described the bill authorizing a Chicago-owned casino and four other statewide bills as "excessive." The legislation would allow slot machines at horse racing tracks and at Chicago airports, and create a racing facility in Springfield.

But the left-leaning Mr. Lang, a Democrat from Skokie who also supports medical [marijuana](#) use, does not view the bill as overly expansive.

"We wouldn't say 'no' to Starbucks because we have too many Starbucks and too many people are drinking coffee," Mr. Lang said. "We would never say to an auto dealer, 'Don't expand your business. Go to Indiana.' This is a business like any other."

For years, Mr. Lang has listened to concerns of anticasinio forces who believe gambling preys on vulnerable populations, triggers addictions that bankrupt families and fails to fulfill promises of revitalized communities. Those arguments have not changed his mind.

"I believe in this concept," he said during an interview in his Skokie office, tucked in a strip mall a few miles from his house. "It doesn't matter to me if it's gaming or widgets. If the only place to buy a widget is in Indiana, people would figure out a way to sell widgets in Illinois. It seems to me as a person interested in job creation and economic development, we would do all we can to keep people in Illinois to spend their money."

He was appointed to the Legislature as a young lawyer representing Niles Township government. Soon after, he began working on a gambling bill under former Gov. Jim Edgar. Mr. Lang said he views casino development as economic development. Mr. Lang, who is not a regular gambler but

enjoys betting occasionally, dismissed moral arguments against casinos. Gambling is here, and it is legal, he said.

But Anita Bedell, the executive director of [Illinois Church Action on Alcohol and Addiction Problems](#), scoffed at Mr. Lang's contention that his casino bill is about economic development.

"The public would laugh out loud if they heard that," she said. "How else could this be but about gambling? Five new casinos and two airports with slot machines? It's all about gambling."

Lawmakers, she said, are focused on the revenue casinos generate without considering the pockets from which it flows.

Mr. Lang described his political philosophy as progressive. Unlike some voters who become more conservative as they age, he went in the opposite direction. Weekly dinners with a conservative uncle shaped his early beliefs.

"Until his middle 50s, my uncle was single, so he came to our house every Sunday," Mr. Lang said. "He was a very, very conservative person and my father, not so much. I would listen to them argue about the things they were hearing on television."

Mr. Quinn has not indicated whether he will sign, amend or veto the gambling bill, which passed the Legislature on May 31. Mr. Lang expects to meet with him again in the next couple of weeks to press him to sign it.

While the governor is known to change his mind, Mr. Lang is known for his predictability. Capitol lobbyists visit Mr. Lang's Springfield office only sporadically, he said. They know where he stands.

A 24-year House veteran representing a solid Democratic district, Mr. Lang is direct in his approach to politics. When two colleagues surprised him by voting against his bill legalizing medical marijuana, Mr. Lang "got them back where they're supposed to be. I reminded them of their commitment, and they remember their commitment now."

But opponents to his gambling bill are mobilizing, and the state's top gambling regulator, Aaron Jaffe, chairman of the Illinois Gaming Board, described the bill recently as "garbage." The gaming board, he said, would need to double its resources to regulate the new facilities.

Mr. Lang said any concerns from the governor's concerns could be addressed in a follow-up bill. Mr. Lang said he would not accept changes, even dropping one casino from the legislation, and he would file a motion to override the governor's action.

His seniority — only six House members outrank him, as the No. 7 license plate on his red Lincoln sedan reinforces — and his safe district allow him to be one of Springfield's most fearless politicians. His controversial marijuana bill failed in the House, but Mr. Lang intends to bring it back.

“There are a lot of people who are sick and hurting and nauseous, and some who are dying and only want a better quality of life and their doctor can’t provide it,” Mr. Lang said.

As one of the House’s strongest gambling proponents, Mr. Lang has received hundreds of campaign contributions from the industry. His political fund remains one of the House’s most robust with nearly \$750,000 in donations and investments as of March 31. Harrah’s Operating Company has donated at least \$35,000 to Mr. Lang since 1999. Neil Bluhm, a developer who is opening a Des Plaines casino this summer, has donated at least \$16,000. Mr. Lang said he uses the money to support Democratic House members during tough elections.

Mr. Lang is one of the chamber’s most vocal members. As deputy majority leader and floor leader, he is responsible for stating the party’s position. His voice regularly hollers through the Capitol intercom system that broadcasts live debate.

“Sometimes I’m acting and sometimes I’m not acting, but it’s fair to say if you see me get really passionate on the floor, it’s coming from my gut,” he said. “If my face gets red and the vein pops out on my forehead, which people make fun of, that’s when I’m serious.”

He is also approachable, according to his colleagues, often dining with Republicans at his favorite Springfield steakhouse.

“He’ll listen,” said Representative Roger Eddy, Republican of Hutsonville, one of Mr. Lang’s regular dinner companions. “At the end of the conversation he’ll say, ‘I can’t do that, but let me tell you what I can do.’ He’s likeable.”

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