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Casino foes lack seasoned leaders

Departures thin legislative ranks

By [Michael Levenson](#)

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The departure of key lawmakers has left the Legislature without a vocal, organized wing of opposition to casinos, as Governor Deval Patrick and legislative leaders push the issue toward a debate this month.

Most on Beacon Hill believe the votes are already in place to approve casinos, as they were last year. But this year there will be no veteran wing of opposition to erode that support with persistent questions about the downside of casinos, such as how they could hurt small businesses and the poor.

Although the remaining opponents promise to question casinos again, the gambling issue is not their central focus. Nor do any of them have the power that House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi had to singlehandedly orchestrate the defeat of Patrick's first push for casinos in 2008.

The handful of activist groups that oppose casinos are also outgunned. They operate on a shoestring budget, relying on volunteers to write to local newspapers and legislators, while national gambling interests have spent \$1.14 million in the first six months of the year to hire an army of well-connected lobbyists.

Scott Harshbarger, the former attorney general who heads Citizens for a Stronger Massachusetts, a group opposed to the casino bill, said activists still have allies in the Legislature, but not the seasoned champions they had in the past.

"Historically, there has always been one person - whether it was a speaker, a governor, or an attorney general - someone on the inside who the advocates could rally around," he said. "So the groups are just as concerned and just as active, but the question is: How do you mobilize here?"

A year ago, when legislative leaders last pushed for casinos, there were two lawmakers who could be counted on to take to the floor and fulminate against them: Daniel E. Bosley, a powerful House committee chairman, and Susan C. Tucker, the Senate's toughest foe, who would cite statistic after statistic from decades of studies of gambling's perils.

But Bosley gave up his seat in January when he ran unsuccessfully for sheriff of Berkshire County. The Web hosting service has plastered his now-defunct campaign website with images

of poker chips, scantily clad women playing roulette, and the famous “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” sign from the Sin City strip.

Tucker also retired in January, and though she remains active in the casino debate, she said she is spending more time with her grandchildren.

Casino opponents, she said, are exhausted after waging uphill battles against the issue for the last three years, only to see Patrick and the leaders of the House and Senate revive it again last week with a deal that would license three casinos and a slot parlor.

“They are tired,” she said. “It’s so unfortunate that once the Big Three make a pronouncement, people just get resigned to that. And there’s a certain fatigue factor, of being tired of the issue.”

Many longtime political observers say it is nearly impossible to stop a bill from becoming law once the three leaders have signed on.

“They’re done; they’re cooked,” said George Bachrach, a former state senator who heads the Environmental League of Massachusetts, which is concerned about the environmental impact of casinos but does not advocate for or against them. “You’re whistling into the wind here if you think you’re going to stop this process.”

Another casino opponent, Representative Matthew C. Patrick, lost his race for reelection last year. He had delivered one of the most emotional speeches on the issue, choking up as he recalled how his father, a World War II veteran, became addicted to betting on horses, forcing his mother to raise the family with food stamps and hand-me-downs.

As casino foes have lost powerful allies, casino supporters have strengthened their hand. The ascension of Robert A. DeLeo, a gambling supporter, into the speaker’s chair in 2009 persuaded nearly 60 lawmakers who had voted against casinos under DiMasi to switch their votes and back casinos last year.

In January, DeLeo solidified his grip on power by promoting loyalists who had supported his unsuccessful push for casinos and slot parlors.

DeLeo gave one of those promotions to Representative Brian Dempsey, his top deputy on gambling last year, who was named House Ways and Means chairman, the powerful post that doles out billions of dollars in state spending.

“We’re optimistic we have the votes,” Dempsey said this week.

The remaining opponents include senators James B. Eldridge, Susan C. Fargo, and Sonia Chang-Diaz, and Representatives Ruth B. Balser, Denise Provost, and Carl Sciortino, who has spoken of the economic devastation experienced by some of his relatives who were addicted to gambling.

Eldridge said if those foes can’t stop the bill, they at least want to strengthen the safeguards it provides for compulsive gamblers and the concessions it gives to communities that host casinos.

“It’s going to have such an impact on the Commonwealth, I think it’s crucial that these concerns are raised,” he said.

Casino critics also hope new allies will step forward.

“There will be a new generation of leaders who will emerge about getting government out of the predatory gambling business, because it’s a failed policy,” said Les Bernal, who was Tucker’s chief of staff for eight years and now heads Stop Predatory Gambling. “As the issue comes front and center, it’s likely some of those voices will speak out more.”