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Corpus Christi Caller-Times

Coastal Bend lawmakers say its time to roll the dice on legalized gambling

By [Rick Spruill](#)

Posted August 5, 2011 at 6:53 p.m., updated August 5, 2011 at 9:20 p.m.

CORPUS CHRISTI — Coastal Bend lawmakers leave little doubt as to their stances on gambling.

Rep. Todd Hunter, R-Corpus Christi, on Friday told a group of casino executives, gaming interests, anti-gaming advocates and racetrack owners from around the state that the idea should be put to a vote.

"Let's roll the dice," he said. "If you guys don't want to give it to the rest of the state, give it to me in Nueces County."

Hunter's comment came during a forum in Corpus Christi hosted by the public issues education group Texas Lyceum. The event concludes today.

The event is designed to encourage discussion among stakeholders about whether drafting laws establishing gambling — defined as slots, video lottery terminals and other games of chance — is good or bad for the state.

Some lawmakers, such as Hunter, argue for gaming on a purely economic basis, leaving issues of morality and gambling addiction to others.

Hunter said the debate could rage indefinitely on whether gambling is good or bad for society.

"But if my community is 80 percent for it, let me put it on the ballot," he said. "Maybe Dallas or West Texas and East Texas don't want it ... but if my community wants it, give it to me."

An anti-gambling advocate said the public might not know what's best when gambling interests pump millions of dollars into public campaigns that he said are filled with misinformation.

"What lawmakers should do is just ask people whether the government should be supporting predatory gambling," said Les Bernal, executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling Foundation, one of the participants in the forum.

Bernal said gambling has failed in other states where it was propositioned to voters as a viable source of jobs and revenue.

"I have yet to have someone explain to me how someone losing all their money in a casino benefits anyone other than the casino owner," he said.

Rep. Raul Torres, R-Corpus Christi, who was not at the event, earlier this week said he is against gambling.

"It will not solve our state's fiscal problems," he said. "It is a tax on the poorest of poor."

He said he would, however, support a referendum.

"If a bill is favorable to our area then I favor letting voters have the opportunity to vote on the issue," he said.

A law proposed during the last legislative session by Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen, would have given gaming a toehold by allowing already-licensed horse and greyhound tracks to install video lottery terminals and slots.

That law, like the identical one introduced in the House, died in committee.

Hinojosa said Friday that gambling must be treated as any other activity that can lead to addiction and can be properly regulated by the state.

Local racetrack owner and beer distributor Greg LaMantia said those opposed to gambling are scared to let the people vote.

"I don't think it's an issue of if we have legalized gambling in Texas but when," he said.

LaMantia said the arguments against it today sound a lot like those used during the Prohibition era of the 1920s and early 30s.

"No one, not even the gaming industry, denies that gambling can be an addiction," he said. "So can alcohol."

Although she did not attend the forum, Rep. Connie Scott, R-Robstown, did not mince words when asked to issue a position statement on the issue.

"I would hope that all of the representatives would remember that they are representatives of the people and it is the people's choice, not their opinion," she wrote in a statement. "I support gambling. I like to gamble. I like to go to Vegas, so yes I support it for Texas and I would vote for it."