

Gambling foes ready for next round in Kentucky casino fight

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FRANKFORT, Ky. (AP) — Gov. Steve Beshear's inaugural day push for a constitutional amendment to allow more kinds of gambling in Kentucky drew immediate opposition from church leaders who are promising a fight.

The Rev. Jeff Fugate of Lexington, a nationally known evangelist and pastor of Clays Mill Road Baptist Church, said Wednesday that gambling would bring only brokenness to Kentucky families and shouldn't even be considered by lawmakers.

"We've got plans in place to fight against it, and we believe that, if legislators are going to vote for it in the majority of districts, they'll be gambling their seat away," Fugate said.

Kentucky has a long history of betting on horse races but doesn't allow casino-style gambling.

Beshear, in a speech on the first day of his second term, said he wants voters to decide whether to expand gambling beyond horse races, lotteries and charitable bingo games. He didn't say specifically what kinds of gambling he is endorsing, though over the past four years he has been a proponent of casinos and of slot machines at horse tracks. So far, lawmakers have refused to approve either option.

Gambling proponents argued that slots at horse tracks would generate money to increase purses. That, they said, would bolster the state's struggling thoroughbred industry and allow Kentucky to keep its designation as "the horse capitol of the world" while also generating needed revenue for the state's General Fund.

Beshear made his support for gambling a key issue in each of his last two gubernatorial elections, and he won them both.

One of the state's best-known gambling foes, John-Mark Hack, is planning to take a lead in the upcoming battle. Hack is the volunteer coordinator for the newly formed Stop Predatory Gambling — Kentucky. He helped to derail efforts early in Beshear's first term to legalize casinos.

Hack said his opposition isn't to Beshear, but to gambling.

"As Kentuckians, we encourage everyone to support the governor's efforts to create more and better jobs, more effective job training, and a state that creates opportunities and promise for every single one of our children," Hack said. "We just don't believe we can accomplish those goals by pursuing the failed policy of predatory gambling."

Lawmakers are scheduled to return to Frankfort on Jan. 3 for the start of the 2012 legislative session that is expected to last into early April. They will have several high-profile chores, including the politically sensitive task of redrawing boundary lines around legislative and congressional districts, and the adoption of a two-year state budget.

Beshear said his gambling proposal, if passed, would be a revenue generator for the state budget. His idea is to also pass a gambling tax.

“Kentucky’s future will be better if we improve the revenue picture for essential services through tax reform, as the governor’s inaugural speech offered to do,” said the Rev. Marian McClure Taylor, executive director of the Kentucky Council of Churches. “But our future will not be better if we turn to expanding gambling, and the Kentucky Council of Churches will continue to speak against an approach proven to be harmful to families and communities.”

Fugate, whose radio programs are aired across the nation, said he’s hopeful lawmakers will reject the proposal.

“Here’s what the populace needs to understand,” he said. “When the governor says let the people decide, that’s a misnomer. The legislative body has to vote for or against gambling. The constitutional amendment then goes on the ballot to either ratify or reject their decision.”

Martin Cothran, a spokesman for The Family Foundation, said he expects lawmakers will face strong pressure to vote for the gambling proposal or risk losing funding for projects in their districts.

“Kentuckians should strap themselves in again for the corruption of our political process that always accompanies these efforts,” Cothran said.