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Gaming expansion a done deal?

By Mike Ramsey, GateHouse News Service

CHICAGO - At a legislative hearing in Chicago last month, opponents of a proposed casino expansion endured more than five hours of testimony that boiled down to a basic question: Who would get all that new casino cash?

Near the end of the meeting, the half-dozen anti-gambling activists finally got a chance to speak. They urged lawmakers not to support legislation that would create three additional casinos, including one for Chicago, while also beefing up existing riverboats.

By then, only a few committee members remained to hear the objections. "I got a lesson in Illinois politics," Phil Blackwell, a Chicago Methodist minister, said last week. "There was no intention of the public being heard. It was a showcase for all of the potential recipients of gambling revenues to argue their case before the committee."

The world got a little bleaker Monday (Oct. 29) for those trying to hold back what may be an inevitable explosion in Illinois' gaming landscape. Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, hinted that he would support some kind of expansion if lawmakers tighten the state's casino-regulation laws.

The Illinois Senate already OK'd the trio of new casinos as part of a \$13 billion capital-construction bill that passed the chamber in September. Gov. Rod Blagojevich has voiced support for the measure, and House Republicans have appeared open-minded about a gambling expansion as a way to raise money for new roads, bridges and schools.

Blackwell said holdout Madigan had been the "last finger in the dam." Tom Grey, a national activist against growth in the gaming industry, held news conferences in Illinois after Madigan's announcement. But even he seemed to acknowledge the momentum seems to be going the way of pro-gambling forces.

"It took me back to my Army days where you fire your final protective fire when you're ready to be overrun," the former Rockford resident said. "We've been fighting against all these odds and all this money and muscle. It was (like) firing the final protective fire."

Grey added: "Let's see what happens." The objectors argue, among several points, that adding new casinos would exacerbate gambling addictions and, rather than sock tourists, would bleed limited resources from low-income and elderly Illinoisans.

Specific to Chicago are concerns that the scandal-plagued city government would allow corruption and even mob influence to flourish with a local casino.

The Senate-approved gaming bill would give the city an unprecedented publicly held casino license, but a state agency, the Illinois Gaming Board, would hold ultimate authority over Chicago.

Madigan insisted Monday that he abhors any form of gambling but conceded it is the most politically "viable" way of raising capital dollars. He has been reliant on Republicans to help pass separate legislation for a bailout of Chicago's mass-transit agencies. "

I don't gamble, I don't go to casinos, I don't go to racetracks, I don't play cards, I don't bet on sports," Madigan said. "Gambling is something to be avoided – by everybody."

Doug Dobmeyer of the Task Force To Oppose Gambling in Chicago admits he feels "disheartened" by the latest developments. But he holds out hope that opponents like himself will get a chance to make the case that Chicago voters should decide in a referendum if they want a casino. He warned that one casino here would simply open the door to additional Chicago casinos in the future. "I don't think it's a done deal," Dobmeyer said.

"I think there are still a lot of factors that have to be taken into account."

Rep. Lou Lang, the Skokie Democrat who chairs the House Gaming Committee that held the recent hearing, said the anti-gambling activists deserve to air their concerns before lawmakers take a final vote on new casinos. But he emphasized the issue is not about whether Illinois should allow gambling. "This is a settled issue in Illinois," Lang said.

Madigan: Tighter casino oversight needed

CHICAGO – Speculation abounds on the motives of House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, who signaled Monday he would support an expansion of gambling in Illinois, including a casino for Chicago.

The catch: He wants stringent reforms in the way state government regulates, investigates and disciplines casino operators. Under a plan he unveiled Oct. 29, the current Illinois Gaming Board and its volunteer members would be replaced by a "truly independent" five-person panel that would be separate from Gov. Rod Blagojevich's administration.

The professional makeup of the board would be mandated by law, and its specially screened members would each be paid an annual salary of at least \$153,000.

The panel would approve all vendor contracts for license-holders. State regulators would be subject to tighter ethical regulations, such as stricter "revolving door" prohibitions on gaming officials who try to get jobs in the casino industry.

The new Gaming Board would be funded through annual fees paid by license-holders, rather than state budget revenue.