

# Liberal Leads The Drive for Slots in Md.

Some Longtime Allies Are Surprised at Perez's Stance

By Philip Rucker  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Monday, November 12, 2007; B01

Thomas E. Perez's liberal credentials couldn't be more solid: At the Justice Department, he prosecuted a Texas gang of white supremacists who targeted blacks in a deadly crime rampage. On Capitol Hill, he counseled Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) on civil rights and criminal justice issues. And on the Montgomery County Council, Perez annoyed business interests by crusading against predatory lending.

So the Takoma Park Democrat's emergence as a salesman for legalizing slot-machine gambling in Maryland has come as a shock to some longtime allies. As Gov. Martin O'Malley's secretary of labor, licensing and regulation, Perez is the administration's public face on the most controversial issue facing the special session of the legislature.

After O'Malley (D) dispatched him on a fact-finding mission, Perez wrote a report on gambling and the racing industry. When the administration was called to testify before lawmakers on O'Malley's slots bill this month, Perez joined the governor's legislative aides at the table.

With legislators taking up slots, a central part of the governor's plan to close a structural deficit projected to be at least \$1.5 billion, Perez is delivering impassioned defenses.

"I certainly hear from many friends in the progressive community who say, 'Tom, how can you support slots?' " Perez said in a recent interview. "I give them a simple answer.

"I'm motivated in large part because I want to address the problems of the uninsured. I want to address the undereducated, and I want to address the challenges confronting people who are living in the shadows of our communities. The reality is we need a funding source to address these challenges."

O'Malley's plan calls for a referendum next year on authorizing up to 15,000 slot machines at five racetrack and non-racetrack locations across the state. Officials estimate that the slots bill would eventually generate close to \$650 million a year for the state, nearly \$400 million a year for the slots parlor operators and more than \$75 million a year to enhance purses in horse races. The Senate approved slots bills on Thursday night; the House has not taken up the issue.

Opponents of slot-machine gambling fear the machines would harvest money from poor people while accelerating crime, addiction and other social ills. Many of Perez's former Montgomery colleagues believe slots are a regressive way to raise revenue, disproportionately affecting low-income residents. Some say they're astounded by Perez's stance.

"That is really an astonishing metamorphosis from crusading against predatory lending to crusading for predatory slot machines," said Del. Luiz R.S. Simmons (D-Montgomery), one of the legislature's most vocal slots foes. "He's not only one of the little drummers in the governor's parade for slots, but he's leading the parade."

Perez is playing a "pivotal role" in the slots debate and will play an "even more important" role in overseeing slots at racetracks if they are legalized, said Rick Abbruzzese, O'Malley's spokesman. The governor believes Perez is a skilled administrator and a man of integrity, Abbruzzese said. "Quite frankly, he's doing his job, and he's doing it very well."

Prior to studying the issue for O'Malley, Perez said he had never been to a gambling parlor. "This is not how I'd choose to spend my entertainment dollars," he said.

But after visiting slots venues in West Virginia and Delaware, Perez said he found that using a portion of slots proceeds to subsidize racing purses has revitalized the horse-racing and breeding industries in those states. He said he is convinced that Maryland can mitigate the potential social costs associated with gambling by being selective on locations.

Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez (D-Montgomery), who worked with Perez in the Clinton administration, said she doesn't consider her friend's support of slots to be a "philosophical transformation."

"I think Tom is being a good soldier," Gutierrez said. "He's joined the administration, and the administration has put out this proposal, and it's the role of the Cabinet to support this proposal."

Perez got personally involved in state politics in 2006 when he ran for attorney general, the first Latino to run statewide in Maryland. He won the endorsements of several labor unions and activists.

But his campaign derailed days before the Democratic primary when an appeals court ruled that he had not practiced law long enough in Maryland to meet the constitutional requirements of the job. Another Montgomery politician, Douglas F. Gansler (D), was elected the state's top prosecutor.

Perez, 46, is an ambitious leader whose political activism comes naturally. His father was active in the anti-government student movement in the Dominican Republic and eventually sought refuge in Buffalo, where Perez grew up.

He went to college at Brown University, where he worked in the dining hall after classes, and later picked up advanced degrees from Harvard Law School and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

On the Montgomery County Council, Perez advocated for what he called the "new Montgomery" -- the growing Hispanic immigrant population and other minority communities he believed were underrepresented in government.

Del. Tom Hucker (D), a Montgomery progressive, called Perez "a principled guy."

"Not everybody in public service, I think, is animated by their conscience, but I think Tom really is somebody who has core convictions that led him to do this work in the first place and that he continues to bring to the job," Hucker said.

Perez acknowledges that legalizing slots is not "the perfect solution" and that he wrestled with whether it is the right thing for the state. But he explains his decision by repeating a mantra passed down from Kennedy, the liberal lion from Massachusetts.

"Idealism and pragmatism are not mutually exclusive," Perez said. "If you insist on perfection and accept nothing less than perfection, that is often a formula for failure."