

PROBLEM-GAMBLING COUNCIL BACKS CASINO PLAN SAFEGUARDS, PIQUES CRITICS

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, AUG. 30, 2011.....The Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling, which advocates for policies to counter “the devastation caused by problem gambling,” threw its support Tuesday behind provisions in a new expanded gambling bill that take aim at gambling addiction.

The move provides the imprimatur of a recognizable group dedicated to reducing compulsive gambling, whose officials often point out that they fund treatment for the gambling habits of Massachusetts residents who visit casinos in Connecticut. The council, which is funded primarily by the state and private donations, has emphasized that it is neutral on matters of expanded gambling policy but seeks to ensure that resources are in place for problem gamblers.

In a statement, the council praised the legislation for including an “exclusion list” to prevent gambling addicts from entering casinos, a posted list of payback statistics on slot machines, onsite space for compulsive gambling counseling, substance abuse and mental health counseling, plans for research related to problem gambling’s impact on areas near casinos, and a public health trust fund to address compulsive gambling.

“We would like to thank the Legislators for taking into account so many of the things that we’ve asked them to consider and for developing a bill that we feel is a big step in the right direction toward addressing concerns about problem gambling and ensuring services for people vulnerable to gambling problems,” council Executive Director Marlene Warner said in a statement.

Gov. Deval Patrick, House Speaker Robert DeLeo and Senate President Therese Murray issued statements of support for a bill – endorsed Friday by the Legislature’s economic development committee – that would sanction three casinos and a slot parlor in Massachusetts. Backers say the facilities will create thousands of jobs, infuse hundreds of millions of dollars of tax revenue into state coffers and ensure that Massachusetts gamblers who spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year at out-of-state facilities spend their money at Bay State casinos.

Opponents of efforts by the Legislature to introduce three casinos and a slot parlor to Massachusetts were piqued by the Compulsive Gambling Council’s support for protections in legislation they say will undoubtedly lead to a rise in problem gambling in Massachusetts.

“I saw that and I was really curious at how timid the council continues to be,” said Kathleen Conley Norbut, an adviser to United to Stop Slots Massachusetts, who questioned the “symbiotic relationship” between the council and the state.

Norbut pointed to the council’s own research describing inadequate funding for compulsive gambling treatment and prevention.

Les Bernal of Stop Predatory Gambling ripped expanded gambling as dependent on revenue derived from gambling addicts and he suggested that the relationship between compulsive gambling councils and state governments have caused the councils to remain muted.

“You have a lot of well-intended people like problem gambling councils who are dependent on the revenue for treatment and it’s completely changed the debate,” he said.

Marlene Warner, executive director of the Council on Compulsive Gambling, said her group is used to being targeted for remaining neutral on the contentious issue. But she emphasized that the group’s praise for the consumer protections do not represent support for the larger bill.

“We’re not promoting the bill,” she said. “We wanted to say, problem gambling services are well represented ... Les and Kathleen are correct. We expect problem gambling numbers to go up. We hope that the funding follows. That’s the one part that we’re still trying to find out the details.”

Margot Cahoon, spokeswoman for the council, argued that the council’s role is simply to ensure that services are available for problem gamblers who need them.

“Certainly people have problems with alcohol,” she said. “It doesn’t make sense to say that there shouldn’t be any bars or liquor stores.

Cahoon said the group doesn’t “necessarily feel that [expanded gambling] is the greatest idea by any means,” but said the safeguards in place “are the things you can do to minimize the harms.”

“Research shows that a lot of times problems increase for a short amount of time and they taper off as people adapt to the new casinos and new gambling opportunities,” she said. “We think that it will increase. We think that people are going to say they experience more problems and they’re going to have more problems ... we don’t know what the eventual tapering off time is.”

Cahoon pointed out that the protections in the bill were not included in versions that had been considered on Beacon Hill in previous years, and described them as important gains to combat compulsive gambling.