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Speedway gets in line for casino

House reviews gambling bills

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As House members consider doubling the number of proposed casinos in the state, the New Hampshire Motor Speedway yesterday declared a "strong and sincere interest" in a gambling facility at the Loudon track.

"I am writing in support of HB 593 as amended," Speedway General Manager Jerry Gappens wrote to members of the House Ways and Means Committee. "New Hampshire Motor Speedway has a strong and sincere interest in applying for a license to be considered as a site for a future casino."

The casino bill was supposed to come up for a vote last week before it was pulled from the calendar so lawmakers could review late amendments, one of which would increase the number of proposed casinos from two to four. The two new casinos would be smaller: 2,000 slot machines and a \$20 million licensing fee, compared with 5,000 slot machines and a \$50 million licensing fee for the two facilities already in the bill.

Gappens wasn't ready to say which casino tier the Loudon track might target. That decision would depend on the casino operator with whom the speedway would partner, he said. The amendment says one of the two smaller casinos must be built in a federally designated, low-income area that would likely put it somewhere in the North Country.

A casino would be part of an ongoing effort to make the track a year-round destination, Gappens said. Track officials recently announced plans for a New England Racing Museum there and are looking into building a hotel on the property, he said.

Gappens noted the speedway has advocated for gambling before. Two years ago, officials argued to expand a plan that would have only awarded casino licenses to dog and horse tracks, he said.

"I think it's evolved to the point that we can say, 'Yeah, we are interested,' " Gappens said.

Representatives for Rockingham Park in Salem and Green Meadow Golf Club in Hudson, the two sites often discussed as potential locations for the bigger licenses, addressed the committee yesterday during a public hearing that lasted more than three hours.

Sens. Chuck Morse, a Salem Republican, and Lou D'Allesandro, a Manchester Democrat, spoke in favor of the bill, as did Rep. Candace Bouchard, a Concord Democrat.

"It is very important we do not cede this advantage to the state of Massachusetts," Morse said, a reference to a law signed by Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick last year clearing the way for three casinos and a slot parlor there. Lobbyists for Rockingham Park say the Salem casino alone would bring the state \$140 million annually, with 60 percent of the revenue coming from Massachusetts customers.

North Country Executive Councilor Ray Burton submitted a statement to the committee in support of the amended casino plan.

"The North Country needs jobs, we need economic investment," Burton wrote. "Now that Massachusetts has acted, New Hampshire can no longer sit by and do nothing."

Seth Cooper, president of the state troopers union, also pushed to pass the bill. After conferring with his counterparts in the casino-friendly states of Delaware and Connecticut, Cooper said the increased state revenue would fund the salaries of more troopers without an increase in major crimes.

"There has been no real mass murders, no real high impact of violent crimes that have come with these casinos that have gone into those two states," he said. "They basically say what they're seeing is the increase in the bodies is a little increase in business. It's your accidents, it's your DWI arrests, it's your small thefts, car break-ins that come with bodies."

Not all the speakers were in favor of the casinos. Jim Rubens, the former Republican state senator who now heads the Granite State Coalition Against Expanded Gambling, said taxpayer organizations and faith groups have joined the anti-gambling effort. The bill would create "economic black holes" that send gambling profits to out-of-state companies while creating an "unholy alliance" between government and a small group of casino operators, he said.

Leslie Bernal, the executive director of D.C.-based nonprofit Stop Predatory Gambling, warned of the social impact of legalized casinos. He mentioned the plight of Gail Rasmussen, a teacher at Hollis Brookline Middle School whose gambling addiction led her rob banks in Massachusetts and Connecticut in 2009.

"Can you think of another government program that turns a seventh-grade English teacher into Jesse James?" he asked.

Other proposed amendments to the bill include using state revenue from the casinos to lower business taxes. Another change would put all four casino licenses out to bid at the same time instead of staggering them in order to avoid a potential monopoly.

The committee did not vote on the amendments yesterday. A subcommittee work session on the bill is scheduled for 1 p.m. Friday with a committee vote set for 10 a.m. Tuesday.

