

The Boston Globe

Online lottery backers to try again on Beacon Hill

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By Eric Moskowitz GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 05, 2016

Beacon Hill backers of online lottery games say they will try again next session, after lawmakers scratched out a proposal that would have allowed the state to sell tickets online.

The state Senate approved the plan last month, voting 22-17 to add it to an economic development bill headed to the governor. But in the waning hours of the session Sunday night, negotiators in a House-Senate conference committee stripped the provision.

“I’m going to refile it for next year and work through the committee process to educate my colleagues on the importance of this legislation, and how it’s the trend nationwide,” said state Senator Jennifer Flanagan, a Leominster Democrat who has sponsored the measure each of the past two sessions. “We’re going to need to deal with it.”

The state lottery has broken its sales record each of the past five years, but proponents of online tickets say that trend is in jeopardy. Ticket sales have declined among young adults, and lottery officials have warned that the lottery, which sold more than \$5 billion in tickets last year, is at risk of decline if it does not meet younger generations online.

Opponents say that digital scratch tickets would provide an even more efficient way for low-income players, who buy tickets in disproportionate numbers, to lose their money.

“There’s no single act of state government that creates more financial inequality than its sponsorship of predatory gambling,” said Les Bernal, national director of the Stop Predatory Gambling Foundation. “Essentially

what the lottery is trying to do is open an online casino, into every home and into every smartphone in the state. An online scratch ticket is virtually the same thing as an online slot machine.”

Convenience store owners who rely on lottery sales have opposed the measure, while supporters say online sales could include spending caps to keep compulsive gambling in check.

Flanagan said the plan passed the Senate in mid-July, but the six closed-door negotiators who reconciled the House and Senate versions of the economic development bill deleted the provision before sending the final bill to Governor Charlie Baker.

Treasurer Deborah Goldberg, whose office oversees the lottery, told the State House News Service that she was disappointed by the move, while the lottery’s executive director, Michael Sweeney, expressed hope that the “iLottery” would ultimately win approval.

In a statement to the Globe on Thursday, Goldberg said she appreciated the Senate’s initial support for the measure, adding that Massachusetts still has “the most successful lottery in the country” on a per capita basis.

But online sales will be key to maintaining a “modern lottery,” she said.

“We remain committed to working with the legislature to ensure the long term viability and success of the lottery, and we believe that being able to conduct business online plays an important role in that future,” Goldberg said.

Estimated figures for the fiscal 2016, which ended June 30, show that the lottery sold \$5.23 billion worth of tickets, growing 4 percent over the previous year. After prize money, retailer commissions, and expenses, that left about \$987 million to be distributed to cities and towns.