

TALLAHASSEE -- The state Senate committee poised to take up a bill to bring casino gambling to Florida heard a report Tuesday on how 13 other states collected millions of dollars in revenues after opening their doors to traditional Las Vegas-style games.

Whether Florida is ready to become the next casino state

is "too early to tell," said Sen. Dennis Jones, a Seminole Republican and chairman of the committee that heard the report authorized by Senate President Mike Haridopolos.

Earlier this week, Haridopolos said he believes there is a "50-50 chance" of the Legislature approving casino games this year.

Jones is sponsoring a bill to bring "destination casinos" to Florida and said it will be ready in about two weeks.

Under the plan, Florida would allow four to five casino resorts to bid for a chance to operate full casinos, including slot machines, blackjack, roulette, baccarat and craps. The bidders would pay a \$50 million application fee and, in return, be offered the exclusive contract to operate the games within a 75-mile radius.

A MONEY-MAKER

The report given to the Senate committee found that Pennsylvania collected \$1 billion in gaming revenues, more than neighboring New Jersey. State coffers in Louisiana, which feature riverboat casinos, top \$500 million annually.

Some states impose bet limits; others restrict where casinos can be located. Pennsylvania imposes a 55 percent tax on its racinos and casinos, while Louisiana taxes its riverboats 21.5 percent, according to the report by the Senate Regulated Industries committee.

The committee also heard from lobbyists for the Las Vegas Sands and Wynn Resort Casinos Tuesday who each said they are interested in attracting new tourists to Florida with promises of high-end retail and convention style casinos that would compete with both Florida's existing horse and dog tracks as well as the seven casinos on the Seminole Tribe's seven reservations.

“We're hoping that there will be legislation put forward that will be conducive to us creating a model,” said Andy Abboud, vice president of the Las Vegas Sands. He said his company wants to build a large-scale meeting and convention space with a retail, dining and entertainment complex with a “gaming component.” As he showed photos of lavish resorts in Las Vegas, Singapore and Macau, he promised that Florida's resort would be “spectacularly designed.”

Jones emphasized that the draw of these resorts is that 90 percent of the property is focused on a convention center, shops and entertainment and “if we point out the 90 percent, not the 10 percent, we'd move farther ahead as far as jobs,” he said, predicting there would be 5,000-7,000 jobs created at each of four proposed locations.

But while Jones is clearly sold on the destination resort idea, other committee members appeared more skeptical.

Sen. John Thrasher of St. Augustine, the outgoing chairman of Florida's Republican Party, asked the committee staff to prepare a report on the constitutionality of the Legislature approving casino games. A former lobbyist for the Jacksonville Kennel Club, Thrasher questioned the accuracy of a court ruling that said the constitution does not bar the Legislature from authorizing casinos. The ruling is under appeal and Thrasher said he believes a constitutional amendment is needed before casinos can be built outside tribal land.

PARIMUTEL FOES

Opposition from the state's parimutuel industry, as well as from Orlando-based tourism attractions, is expected to be intense unless lawmakers find a way to give them additional gambling options.

Jones said he's not worried about the impact of casino gambling on the state compact with the Seminole Tribe because the 20-year agreement with the state is subject to review in five years. In that time, the tribe guarantees it will pay the state at least \$1 billion.

“If we were looking at destination gaming, it would take four to five years to build one of those complexes out,” Jones said. “It would not even impact the compact until the first card would play and that would be three or four years down the road and we're going on our second year of the compact. So that's really a nonissue at this point as far as I see it.”

Jones said Florida needs the resort casinos because it is losing business for mega-conventions to other states. Jones said he expects some gaming issues to emerge this session, including a bill that addresses legalizing online poker in Florida.

Melanie Brenner, the executive director of Poker Voters of America, told the committee that an estimated 900,000 Floridians play online poker and spend about \$600,000 a day on illegal Internet poker sites. If Florida were to legalize online games within the state, it could reap millions in additional revenue, she said.

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