

By BOB SALSBERG

BOSTON

Gov. Deval Patrick indicated on Thursday that the door remained open to casino gambling in Massachusetts but that slot machines at race tracks were still a major point of contention with House Speaker Robert DeLeo.

During his monthly appearance on

WTKK-FM, Patrick said he and DeLeo had discussed casino gambling in recent weeks -- though not in detail -- and planned to hold further discussions in the future.

Patrick refused to sign a bill last summer that called for three resort-style casinos and slot parlors at two of the state's four racetracks. Under the measure, slot parlors would be bid on by the track owners, but the governor contended that contracts should be open to all qualified bidders.

Two of the tracks -- Wonderland in Revere and Suffolk Downs in Boston -- are in DeLeo's legislative district.

"I have been as clear as possible that no-bid contracts for track owners are off the table for me," said Patrick, who also questioned the revenue and job-creating potential of slot parlors as compared to destination casinos.

At the same time, the governor said casinos were not central to his administration's job growth strategy and he expressed concern that publicity surrounding the gambling debate detracted from more critical issues at the Statehouse.

"It sucks all of the oxygen out of the building," he said.

Patrick also promised that he would have no discussions about casinos in Massachusetts with his former top political strategist Doug Rubin, now that Rubin has registered to lobby for a firm that has contracts with the state lottery.

The Boston Globe reported Thursday that GTech Corp., a Rhode Island-based company that provides services to the gaming industry, had become a client of Rubin's consulting firm, Northwind Strategies.

Rubin was also a campaign consultant last year to Steven Grossman, who as state Treasurer now oversees the lottery.

Patrick said he "thinks the world" of Rubin and considered him a person of high integrity, but also said he was sensitive to any appearance of a conflict.

"Doug and I will not have any conversations about gambling if the issue comes up," the governor said.

Rubin made a similar pledge in an interview with the Globe: "I would never put the elected officials I have worked with in a difficult situation by directly lobbying them on behalf of a specific issue," he told the newspaper.

Patrick took several other questions during his appearance on the "Ask the Governor" segment, the first since he was re-elected to a second four-year term.

He strongly defending his out-of-state travel commitments, saying the upcoming trips weren't comparable to those his predecessor, Republican Mitt Romney, took while laying the groundwork for a White House bid.

Patrick is scheduled to speak March 5 at a Democratic Party dinner in Colorado. He then embarks on a 10-day trade mission to Israel and Britain. In the spring he plans a tour to promote his new book, "A Reason to Believe."

Asked about Democratic criticism of Romney's frequent absences as governor, Patrick said it was a "fascinating question," but said he wouldn't be traveling nearly as much as his predecessor did in 2006, when Romney was away for more than two-thirds of his final year in office.

Patrick also said he would be talking up Massachusetts during his travels, while Romney often criticized the heavily-Democratic state while appealing to potential Republican supporters.

"I'm going out promoting the Commonwealth while he was making us the laughing stock," Patrick said.

Asked about the \$450,000 in unused sick pay owed to outgoing Massachusetts Port Authority director Thomas Kinton, the governor said that was the type of thing "that drives the public over the edge."

Kinton announced last week that he would retire June 1 and is entitled to the money under a previous policy in effect for Massport managers. Patrick praised Kinton for his service and said he was glad that his administration was able to push for a change in the sick time policy.

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