

The casino industry might be better than state lawmakers at determining just how many casinos belong in Bucks County, Philadelphia or any other part of Pennsylvania, the chairman of the House Gaming Oversight Committee said Thursday.

Rep. Curt Schroder, R-Chester County, has introduced legislation that would free up the rescinded licenses for Foxwoods Casino in Philadelphia and any other future

failed gaming operations for possible reallocation "anywhere in this commonwealth," his House Bill 65 reads.

The lawmaker also wants those licenses offered up to the highest bidders. Licenses would have minimum bids of between \$12.5 million and \$66.5 million, depending upon the type and size of the gaming operation.

The current gaming law provides for a maximum 14 casinos, sets specific licensing fees, and also includes varying buffer zones between casinos depending on their size. Ten casinos now operate in the state. Two licenses have been set aside for an undetermined resort and a future racetrack.

Two other licenses are in doubt.

The fate of a casino at the Valley Forge Convention Center could be decided in Pennsylvania's Supreme Court.

When the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board approved a slots license for Valley Forge, officials at Parx Casino in Bensalem filed suit against the state. Parx owners said the Valley Forge operation would be too close to its own customer base and could "cannibalize" on the Philadelphia market.

The newspaper was unable to reach officials at Parx for comment.

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The gaming oversight chairman had called a special meeting in Philadelphia on Thursday to discuss his proposal and its potential impact on the city, which, under current state law, is guaranteed two casinos.

At the hearing in city hall, state lawmakers questioned whether the Philadelphia region might already be oversaturated with casinos such as SugarHouse on Delaware Avenue, Parx in Bensalem and Harrah's in Chester.

SugarHouse opened in September on Delaware Avenue. The Foxwoods license was revoked in December, following months of uncertainty about the status of the project.

"Will a casino of equal or lesser size saturate the market? We really don't know," testified Alan Greenberger, deputy mayor for planning and economic development in Philadelphia. "We don't have a better crystal ball. We don't know what's going to happen."

State Rep. Michael O'Brien, D-Philadelphia, asked if the mayor's office had seriously considered or studied the concept of casino oversaturation. Greenberger said no. That uncertainty was just one argument brought forward by activists such as Paul Boni of Stop Predatory Gambling and Dianne Berlin of Casino Free Pennsylvania. Both residents of Philadelphia testified during the hearing of the uncertain impact that casinos might have on Pennsylvania towns. Berlin criticized Schroder's legislation, saying, for example, if Newtown Borough were to approve a casino license, its neighboring towns would have no say in the matter, she said. Berlin also said many gaming issues were decided without the consent of Pennsylvania residents and characterized them as "unconstitutional." Boni said the state was benefiting from the sickness of problem gamblers. His comments brought criticism from state Rep. Tina Davis, D-141, who also sits on the Gaming Oversight Committee. If the state government was going to steer clear of all vices, then it might also need to reconsider taxes on cigarettes and liquor, she argued. A former Bristol Township councilwoman, Davis said her community received "almost \$2 million every year on grants for roads and other things because of the casino. Every day, I can say to a constituent, go to the casinos and you can get a job. For me, the advantages of the money that it brings in far outweigh this addiction problem," Davis added. Davis said she wasn't sure how she might vote on House Bill 65. "I agree with (Schroder) that putting the casino licenses out to bid would bring in more revenue. Unfortunately, it also ties into the idea that the casino might not remain in the Philadelphia area and I want to create local jobs." Schroder said he believed the Gaming Oversight Committee could vote on his bill sometime this summer. ___ Online: tinyurl.com/4zk35rn

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