

They are fierce rivals in the quest for the governor's office. But Deval Patrick, Tim Cahill and Charlie Baker can agree on one thing: Casino gambling should be legal here.

How we get to that point is a whole other matter.

Each candidate has specific differences on how casino gambling should be implemented in the state. Sure, their positions on casinos – or just about

any public policy issue, for that matter – have taken a backseat to political theatrics in recent weeks. But the fate of this longstanding source of debate on Beacon Hill could be in the governor's hands next year.

Normally, a gubernatorial veto is swatted away like an annoying insect by the Legislature. The Dems reign supreme at the State House. And going along with the leadership's views is, shall we say, highly encouraged.

But that balance of power shifted this summer with respect to gambling: The long-awaited casino bill was finally released by a conference committee and whisked through the House and Senate, only to promptly be set aside by Patrick.

Legislative leaders were cutting it close, waiting until formal sessions were about to end for the year. That made it impossible to address the Democratic governor's proposed changes without taking the unusual step of coming back for a special session. But a narrow vote in the Senate means that overturning a veto won't be quite as easy if the Legislature, as expected, revives the casino bill early next year.

So that brings us back to the governor's race. Of all the candidates, only Cahill would sign that casino bill if it was handed to him today (It's worth noting here, even though she's a long-shot, that Green-Rainbow candidate Jill Stein is the only one in the race who is dead-set against casinos).

Yes, Cahill's support for an ambitious gambling expansion is a bit ironic. After all, he was a

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vocal casino critic during his first term as state treasurer. Like his predecessors in that job, Cahill worried that slot machines and roulette wheels would divert gamblers from the state Lottery, which the treasurer oversees.

Cahill's change of heart occurred in 2007, after lottery sales began to decline. Rather than fight about how to slice up the pie, Cahill told members of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, the state should try to grow the pie instead. Of course, he hadn't yet announced his candidacy for governor. But he certainly had his eyes on 2010 at the time.

Cahill reiterated his reasons on Thursday about why he would support the compromise bill, which calls for three resort-style casinos and converting two racetracks into slot machine parlors. The Democrat-turned-independent says the two racinos would help generate jobs and state taxes quickly while we wait for casinos to be built. Meanwhile, he says the three casinos – in the Boston area, and in the southeastern and western parts of the state – would spread around the long-term economic benefits.

That's too much, too soon for Baker, who only wants one casino. The former insurance executive said on Tuesday that three casinos would hurt too many existing businesses. He cited the state's concert venues, in particular, as potential victims that could be locked out of negotiations for performers.

Baker supports up to 2,000 additional slot machines, a similar scale to what lawmakers envisioned in their final bill. But the GOP candidate wants slot parlor rights to be put out to bid instead of only allowing the four racetracks to compete for them.

We know where Patrick stands, based on his actions in the Great Casino Standoff of 2010. Patrick prefers resort casinos over racinos. He says racinos' benefits are overshadowed by their burdens on society, and severely limiting the competition for slots licenses is precariously close to offering no-bid contracts.

Patrick was willing to accept one racino – a fig leaf offered to House Speaker Robert DeLeo in the hopes of moving the negotiations along. But Patrick's overture was snubbed when the compromise bill came back with two.

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It's obviously impossible to know the exact makeup of the Legislature in 2011, with legislative races in full swing right now. But it's a safe bet that DeLeo and Senate President Therese Murray will return to their perches.

Clyde Barrow, a gambling industry researcher at UMass-Dartmouth, says Murray probably would only need to swing a couple of votes in the Senate to override any casino bill veto (a veto-proof margin in the House will likely stay, no matter how the state rep races are resolved on Nov. 2).

Then there's the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe's effort to build a casino in Fall River. Putting any land in trust for a sovereign reservation will be tough because of a 2009 Supreme Court ruling. But state lawmakers take the possibility of a tribal casino seriously. Barrow says the compromise bill is aimed at persuading the tribe to pursue a commercial casino license under the bill's terms. The tribe would give up sovereign rights, but would gain crucial help from the Legislature.

DeLeo's two predecessors' fierce opposition kept gambling bills from moving forward in previous years. Tom Finneran and Sal DiMasi are gone. But the underlying controversies will likely continue to put any casino bill in a precarious position.

There will still be plenty of critics who believe problems with gambling addiction far outweigh any benefits casinos might bring. As long as they exist in sufficient number in the Legislature, the governor will wield an unusual amount of power on the issue.

The question of whether to expand gambling in the state has been a perennial source of debate in the Legislature for years. The outcome of this governor's race may very well determine whether we finally see some action when the issue surfaces again.

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