

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) — Public policy experts estimate that New Hampshire could net more than \$50 million a year if it builds a casino in the southern part of the state. Tim Moore puts his share at about \$1,500.

Moore, a 43-year-old sales manager from Seabrook, gambles at Connecticut casinos about four times a year, dropping roughly \$250 per visit. But he'd bump up the frequency to at least six times a year if there was a casino closer to home. He's fed up with the Connecticut scene and believes a New Hampshire casino would bring much-needed revenue and jobs to the state, while perhaps boosting tourism and lowering taxes.

"I am sick and tired of the Connecticut casino business model nickel and diming everyone," he said. "Take a look around the casinos. They are dirty, the staff are rude and they all look miserable."

Moore is backing Republican Ovide Lamontagne for governor next month. But no matter who wins, for the first time in a decade, New Hampshire will have a governor who favors legalized casino gambling.

Lamontagne, who opposed casino gambling when he ran in 1996, is now open to allowing a single casino at Rockingham Park in Salem. Democrat Maggie Hassan, who supported a number of gambling bills during her three terms in the state Senate, also supports allowing one highly-regulated, high-end casino. Unlike Lamontagne, she is not set on a particular location.

With Massachusetts planning three or four casinos, New Hampshire has to be competitive, even in the face of opposition from resort and restaurant owners who fear a casino would funnel off their business, Hassan said during a recent debate.

"I don't want our gambling revenues and rooms and meals money to be spent in Massachusetts," she said.

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Written by Administrator

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But any bill would still have to get through the Legislature, which has proven difficult in past years. The House, in particular, has never supported expanding gambling bills. It defeated the most recent attempt in March after outgoing Gov. John Lynch promised to veto the bill if it reached his desk.

At least three lawmakers have signaled their intent to file gambling-related legislation if they are re-elected next month. Though the gubernatorial candidates only support a single casino, state Sen. Lou D'Allesandro said Friday that the number of licenses he will include in his bill is still an open question.

"They both seem focused on one license, but my gut tells me if you do something like that, you kill the ability to get anything passed because all the negativity about making one person rich becomes omnipresent all over again," said D'Allesandro, D-Manchester.

An analysis by the independent New Hampshire Center for Public Policy Studies in January projected that a large casino in southern New Hampshire could generate \$189 million in revenue for the state, but factoring in competition from Massachusetts and social costs associated with gambling would bring the net gain down to about \$53 million.

Residents are evenly split on whether they support or oppose the expansion of gambling, according to an April poll by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Center at Dartmouth College. Two years, the University of New Hampshire delved into the issue more deeply, organizing a series of "community conversations" around the state and online.

In two communities, Salem and Berlin, there was general and widespread support for the concept of expanded gambling. But opponents elsewhere said expanded gambling would increase demand for social services and damage the state's business- and family-friendly reputation.

LeeAnn Michael, who owns the Country Squire Motel in Littleton, attended one of the 2010 sessions. She was opposed to casino gambling then, and remains so now.

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“It’s anti-family on so many levels,” she said Thursday. “And they tout jobs, but these are not good jobs.”

Even if the state starts with one casino, that won’t be the end of it, she said, pointing to other states that have continued adding facilities to compete with neighboring states.

“If it comes in, that’s exactly what will happen. The state will become addicted to it,” she said.

Michael plans to vote for Hassan, but she hopes the Legislature will continue to vote down gambling bills.

“I don’t see the advantage to New Hampshire or our image,” she said. “My hope is that it would be successfully held off.”

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