

Casino idea may have new life in N.H.

Written by Administrator

Monday, 19 November 2012 22:08 -

November 19, 2012 2:00 AM

CONCORD — After years of failing to get casino bills through the New Hampshire House, gambling supporters are optimistic the dice is rolling their way with Democrat Maggie Hassan's election as governor.

Hassan supports one well-regulated, high-end casino that is selected by a competitive bid. The man she is succeeding, Democratic Gov. John Lynch, squelched efforts to bring a casino to New Hampshire during his eight years in office by questioning whether it would negatively affect quality of life.

Then this year, Lynch threatened to veto a bill that would have legalized four casinos licensed to install up to 14,000 video slot machines and 420 table games. The bill died in the House despite supporters' arguments New Hampshire would lose revenue to Massachusetts, which is embracing development of up to three resort-style casinos and a slots parlor.

New Hampshire's 24-member state Senate has passed casino legislation in the past, but the 400-member House has never endorsed video slots.

But gambling proponents say Hassan's support may be enough to steer the state in a different direction.

"It's a new era. It's a new start. Hopefully it's time for a new idea on the concept," said Jerry Gappens, executive vice president and general manager of New Hampshire Motor Speedway in Laconia.

State Sen. Lou D'Allesandro, who has championed expanding gambling for 14 years, plans to file a new bill to legalize video slots. He said it probably will be similar to the bill the House rejected.

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Jim Rubens, chairman of the Granite State Coalition Against Expanded Gambling, is confident New Hampshire lawmakers will reject casino legislation despite Hassan's support.

"It'll be a major fight by virtue of the governor now being open to it," he said.

James Demers, who lobbies for Millennium Gaming Inc., says he's gone through the list of newly elected lawmakers and believes the prospects for passage are good with its promise of jobs and millions of dollars in non-tax revenue.

"A lot of people are seeing Massachusetts having a significant impact on potential and existing state revenue," he said.

Millennium Gaming of Las Vegas has an option to buy Rockingham Park race track in Salem and proposes spending \$450 million building a facility at the track.

Republican Ovide Lamontagne, who lost to Hassan in the race for governor, had campaigned that the race track should be the site of the state's first casino. Hassan argued the site should be competitively bid.

"Gov.-elect Hassan supports bringing one well-regulated, high-end casino to the Granite State because it could help our state create jobs, capture revenue that would otherwise be spent in other states, and help New Hampshire fund education and other essential state services," said spokesman Marc Goldberg.

"She believes that New Hampshire can develop a casino plan that will protect our brand as a family friendly state with a great outdoor economy," he added.

D'Allesandro disagrees that only one casino should be licensed.

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And Gappens — who is interested in putting a casino at the speedway — believes there is room for a couple of casinos.

Rubens believes that if Hassan sticks to her promise to limit her support to one casino, pro-casino supporters will fight among themselves rather than reach consensus on one location, dooming passage.

"If there is only one, she'll lose a lot of votes in the House and Senate," Rubens predicted.

Gappens believes there is an appetite for gambling in New Hampshire, but not higher taxes.

"As we do another budget for the state, we need to look at new revenue sources and people don't want those revenue sources to be increased taxes," he said.

Hassan campaigned that some budget cuts, particularly aid to public colleges, made by the departing Republican Legislature should be at least partly reversed. She did not propose major taxes to pay for the restorations and instead proposed raising the cigarette tax a dime, rehiring auditors laid off at the Department of Revenue to increase business tax collections, and expanding legalized gambling.

With the economy still sluggish, the pressure will be on Hassan and Democrats to reverse GOP-made budget cuts, but even if lawmakers approve a casino next year, the income from it probably won't be available for the two-year budget Hassan presents to lawmakers in February. Democrats will control the House starting next month, but not the Senate.

D'Allesandro says New Hampshire must act regardless if it wants to share the gambling market with Massachusetts.

"We know if we don't do anything that opportunity will be gone forever," he said.

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