

HRTPO study says casino gaming could benefit roads in Va.

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A new study by the Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization says building a locally based Hampton Roads casino and resort could result in \$113 million in tax revenue each year that could be used for roads.

The study, commissioned by a state senate committee this past spring as a way to mitigate regional tolls, suggests substantial revenue and jobs could be produced by allowing casino gaming. However, it also outlines a host of social, economic and criminal issues associated with them. Currently, casinos are not permitted by Virginia law.

The HRTPO study says casino gaming in the region would produce between 1,900 and 2,400 jobs.

"There would be additional revenues for the Hampton Roads gaming industry depending on the mix of restaurants, entertainment venues and accommodations that were included in the casino," the report says.

Dwight Farmer, executive director of HRTPO, said that while the study examined potential revenues generated by casino gaming, it would be up to state lawmakers to make sure funds generated were used for transportation. Money raised from the Virginia Lottery is used to help fund education.

HRTPO's study also cites a "host of social costs associated with casino gambling, many of which are unquantifiable." But it notes "studies suggest that casinos increase the prevalence of crime, bankruptcy, mental illness and suicide and pose additional social, regulatory and business costs."

According to the HRTPO report, the National Gambling Impact Study Commission said the annual cost for a person with a gambling problem was \$560 per year. The report also cites

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another study that estimates the cost of crime to be \$110 per adult in the locality where the casino is located.

Chris Freund, Vice President of the Family Foundation of Virginia, said the benefits of casino gambling are not worth the costs.

"The gambling lobby offers casinos as a panacea for every financial issue the state has," Freund said. "But the reality is the costs in crime, in broken families and lost production always exceed what little casinos have to offer. You don't have to go far from the Atlantic City Boardwalk to see what a casino brings to a city, and it isn't pretty," Freund said.

Recent efforts to start casino gaming in the state have been unsuccessful.

State Sen. Thomas K. "Tommy" Norment, R-James City County, who in the past has touted video horse racing gambling as a way to fund transportation, said he didn't think there would be much support from the HRTPO board for casino gaming.

"The House of Delegates has consistently defeated any plan to expand gambling," Norment said.

Del. Mike Watson, R-Williamsburg, told the Daily Press via email Tuesday that he would need more information before he could support or oppose adding casino gaming to the region. HRTPO board members will be briefed on the study on Thursday during their monthly meeting.

"I do not have a fundamental problem with casino gambling. In fact, I think it is better for the economy than the lottery as it creates jobs, keeps more money circulating in the private sector, and if properly administered, will tend to generate revenue from those that can more afford it," said Watson.

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"That said, I have not studied this specific proposal and cannot speak in favor or against it at this time. I'm open to reviewing the concept and will be happy to address it and evidence offered to support its conclusion at a later date."

Bogues can be reached by phone at 757-247-4536.

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