

Written by Administrator
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What do you think of the plan? Take a poll

State Senate Democrats on Monday proposed giving the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority greater powers to run Atlantic City's tourism district, as an alternative to Gov. Chris Christie's desire for a public-private partnership

to run the special zone.

The Democrats' plan to revive the state's gaming and racing assets also would allow state ownership of horse racing tracks, which the Republican governor wants to see privatized. Democrats also say their proposal would fulfill Christie's mandate to bring state involvement to the district around the Boardwalk and Sen. Frank S. Farley Marina.

But their plan stops short of Christie's wish for a new public-private partnership to oversee the tourism district. The group of Democrats, two of whom represent northern New Jersey districts, also want to see the state-owned racetracks retained and run at a lower operating cost. Christie's advisers have proposed that the state cease running the tracks and find outside management for them.

The proposal makes no mention of putting video lottery terminals, or VLTs, in state racetracks. The idea of putting the slot-style machines at the tracks has been pushed by the horse racing industry but was rejected in [Gov. Christie's plan](#). Senate President Stephen Sweeney, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland, also has opposed putting VLTs in the tracks, as does Sen. Jim Whelan, D-Atlantic.

The five senators touting the alternative plan are Whelan; Sweeney; Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic; Paul Sarlo, D-Bergen, Essex, Passaic; and Ray Lesniak, D-Union.

Horse racing groups criticized Christie's plan when he publicized it July 21 during appearances at the Meadowlands and in Atlantic City. They said the move would put thousands of horse racing-industry jobs in jeopardy.

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Prompted by that criticism, Sweeney held three gaming summits in August and September. Together with five Assembly colleagues, the senators used those hearings to hammer out alternative ideas. Sweeney has said previously that he would prefer to see an expanded role for the CRDA rather than the creation of a new state entity to run Atlantic City's tourism district.

"This agenda will protect the Meadowlands Racetrack and Monmouth Park and allow racing to survive in the world's biggest market. We will re-engineer Atlantic City to put it head-and-shoulders above the competition and protect the tens of thousands of jobs the resort supports," Sweeney said.

The proposal calls for reorganizing the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority to give it zoning and planning authority over the casino district and allow the agency to play a more significant role in the resort's management, including greater oversight and investment in tourism and policing to ensure a clean and safe environment.

A spokesman from the CRDA did not return calls for comment on the proposal Monday.

Whelan said expanding the CRDA into an agency with enough staff and powers to run a district would make more sense than creating a new state body to run the area.

"We don't want to put another layer of bureaucracy over everything," Whelan said.

He said the authority likely would merge with the Atlantic City Convention & Visitors Authority under the proposal and would take up the governor's challenge to make the most visited part of Atlantic City "clean and safe."

"They don't have all the power necessary to run a district right now" Whelan said. But the authority was the best choice because it had a ready-made revenue stream, he said. "That's where the money is."

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The CRDA, a unique agency nationwide, funnels a portion of casino revenue into redevelopment projects in Atlantic County as well as elsewhere in the state. The authority has handled about \$1.8 billion in more than two decades.

On horse racing's future, the Democrats' recommendations call for "elite" racing meets with large prize purses at the Meadowlands as well as Monmouth Park, where the plan was launched as an experiment this year.

The Democrats' proposal leaves unanswered how those purses would be paid for.

Christie said in July that to continue to have a state agency, the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, run racetracks in deficit would be to "subsidize failure."

The Democrats' proposal includes forcing license-holders of off-track wagering parlors to open the parlors and generate revenue for the state, which could help keep the tracks open.

But the framework does not specify what would happen to a \$30 million subsidy paid by casinos to racetracks, a deal that runs out in early 2011.

Whelan said that subsidy would end, but he left open the possibility of another financial deal between casinos and racetracks in the event that Internet gaming becomes a reality in the state.

The legislation to fill in this framework has not been finished, but it may be introduced as soon as early November, Democrats said.

Christie spokesman Michael Drewniak said he would not comment on the proposal until the administration has had a chance to review it.

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Among other Republicans, Assemblyman Vincent Polistina, R-Atlantic, described the summits and resulting plan as an "exercise in political games and partisanship ... that has been extremely underwhelming."

"The big difference is that what we are working towards is a unified, cohesive plan where all of the entities work collaboratively with the industry. We can no longer be a bunch of individual silos and fragmented state agencies that work individually. The tourism district will become an umbrella which will provide for a true partnership between private industry and government for the betterment of the entire city," he said.

He called for Whelan to "hook his caboose onto our train now, since we have had almost a three-month head start."

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