

Written by Administrator
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The long-awaited legislation to create smaller casinos in Atlantic City looked last month like the first part of the Democrats' plan to save the resort.

Last Monday, the key senators and assemblymen who organized a 10-member Democratic panel to host gaming summits across the state listed their bullet-point priorities for

saving the casino resort, and mentioned the so-called "boutique casino" bill among them.

But the increasingly key piece of legislation has not moved quickly, and this week again hit possible delays.

The proposal, advanced by state **Sen. Jim Whelan**, D-Atlantic, would allow for two casino-hotels to be licensed at a smaller scale than previously has been allowed in the resort, allowing developers casino floor-space in a property with as few as 200 hotel rooms, and flexibility to expand the property later.

Senators passed the measure in late September, only after Whelan agreed to fix concerns by casino companies that four new casino licenses should be reduced to two. The changes passed also require all-new construction.

But the bill may face another hurdle in the Assembly, where the sponsor of the matching measure, **Assemblyman John Burzichelli**, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland, would not rule out future amendments Friday.

"Jim worked through a lot of this, but there may be a few more amendments that need to get done," Burzichelli said. Meanwhile, a planned committee hearing on the bill was canceled last week.

The sticking points, largely upsetting existing casino operators, have focused on the number of new casinos, but also how to ensure the new properties are a step up from what state **Sen. Jeff Van Drew**

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, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, called "warehouses" - smaller gaming halls with little in the way of entertainment.

Whelan has said numerous times that he wants to see the bill passed this year, and waiting in the wings to apply for a boutique license could be Hard Rock International, which is looking at launching a casino at the city's Route 40 entryway in the style of its eateries, full of rock 'n' roll memorabilia.

The back-and-forth matters because Burzichelli indicated the 200-room bill would fit with the package of legislation Democrats are hoping to speed through, aimed at restructuring the state's gaming and horse-racing operations to make them more profitable.

The legislation, which is developing out of the summits, could include at least five bills, Burzichelli said. Among them, he expects a bill revising casino regulations enforced by the Casino Control Commission to allow for some deregulation.

"And that's where the 200-room proposal really belongs," Burzichelli said.

Whelan said he would have concerns about any later amendments to the legislation that passed the Senate.

"This bill has been compromised enough," he said.

But he may have to deal with senior Democrats, who are clearly hoping the package passes soon, to outflank **Gov. Chris Christie's** own Atlantic City legislation.

Burzichelli said he sees a fast timeline: "We want this package passed by the end of November."

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Arbitration arguments

Elsewhere last week, Democrats tried to counter Christie's accusations of foot-dragging by launching a plan to revise how police and firefighter employment contracts are arbitrated.

Christie had already backed a hard 2 percent cap on such public employee awards, and wants to give school districts the power of "last best offer" in the event that negotiations with unions stall.

Democrats responded by dropping the word "best."

In their proposal - called "last offer" - the arbitrator could select the final contract offer of one of the parties, basing the selection on the offer the arbitrator deems the more "reasonable" of the two.

That decision, Democrats say, would be based on nine economic and statutory factors outlined in the law, and would be binding.

That didn't fly with Christie, said spokesman **Michael Drewniak**, who lambasted the Democrats' efforts to avoid setting a hard limit on how much the union members could make.

"Gov. Christie continues to maintain that a hard cap on arbitration awards, as he proposed in May, is the only real way to control costs for municipalities and provide real property-tax relief for New Jersey taxpayers," Drewniak said Thursday. "The bill before the Assembly Budget and Appropriations Committee today falls far short of those goals."

People and Power by Juliet Fletcher, The Press of Atlantic City's Statehouse Bureau reporter, appears every Sunday. Fletcher can be reached at:

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