

Senate committee endorses casino bill

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 10 February 2016 01:01 -

CONCORD — With little fanfare and only token opposition, the latest casino gambling proposal came before the Senate on Tuesday.

[Senate Bill 551](#) would allow one casino at Rockingham Park in Salem and produce about \$100 million in state revenue a year, said the bill's prime sponsor and the Legislature's most tenacious casino supporter, Sen. Lou D'Allesandro, D-Manchester.

At the public hearing Tuesday before the Senate Ways and Means Committee, which voted 3-2 to recommend passage of the bill, D'Allesandro said there was little new in this proposal from the ones he has introduced over the last two decades.

"The dramatic difference with this," D'Allesandro said, "is it designates one site, Rockingham Park in Salem."

All of the procedures and regulatory oversight is the same, he said, with the Lottery Commission having full control.

Under SB 551, up to 3,500 video lottery machines and up to 160 table games would be allowed at the Salem site.

The state Lottery Commission would regulate the casino, which would turn over 35 percent of its gross video game revenue and 18 percent of the table game revenue to the state.

Of the state's share, Salem would receive 3 percent; abutting communities, Rockingham County and problem gambler treatment programs would each receive 1 percent, and the remaining money would go to revenue sharing to its legal limit.

The rest of the money would go into the gaming regulatory fund.

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D'Allesandro lamented that the state has had expanded gaming on its plate for 20 years and not approved anything.

"Time is not on our side," he said. "Time was on our side 20 years ago when it was estimated to bring in \$100 million, that would be \$2 billion now."

He estimated his latest proposal would provide about \$100 million in annual revenue.

Under D'Allesandro's bill, the original license to operate the casino would cost \$80 million and be good for 10 years. Renewing the license would cost \$1.5 million.

He said the \$80 million is a bargain, noting the success of two casinos in Maine. He said the Oxford casino advertises on Manchester Transit Authority buses.

"We have gambling all around us," D'Allesandro said, "but we don't get the revenue."

Bill McLaughlin of the Rochester Fair Association supported the bill but believes there should be opportunities for other casinos at different sites.

He said the Maine casinos are so successful they are discussing a third site in York County, which borders New Hampshire's seacoast region.

"New Hampshire residents are gambling in neighboring states and those states and communities are getting the benefits," McLaughlin said. "Rochester may want to participate in that."

John Tuthill of Acworth opposed the bill, saying he opposes expanded gambling in New Hampshire.

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The Senate has approved casino gambling proposals for a number of years, but the House has yet to approve expanded gambling, including last year when it voted down another proposal from D'Allesandro and Senate President Chuck Morse, R-Salem.

The committee voted to recommend the bill pass the Senate on a 3-2 vote, with Sen. David Boutin, R-Hooksett, joining D'Allesandro and Morse in support, and Sens. Andy Sanborn, R-Bedford, and Dan Feltes, D-Concord, opposing the bill.

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