

BATON ROUGE — Five riverboat gambling bills gained committee approval here Tuesday and move to the full Senate for debate. Four of those measures affect the L'Auberge Casino Resort and the Golden Nugget, both in Lake Charles, and the 13 other riverboats in the state.

Two bills by Sen. Ronnie Johns, R-Sulphur, would allow riverboats to re-locate their casinos that are now on the water to land not more than 1,200 feet away. They also establish a limit of 2,365 gambling spaces in each casino that replaces a 30,000-square-foot limit.

Johns said moving to land would also allow the casinos to eliminate paddle wheels and other requirements when located on water.

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**Sen. Ronnie Johns**  
R-Sulphur

The other measure deals with what are called "promotional pays" that are designed to attract potential patrons to the casinos. Company officials consider that double taxation since the promotions are taxed in addition to the 21.5 percent tax on their income that they already pay to the state.

Taxes on promotional pays have been bringing in \$18 million annually. Johns said he will work with the casinos to come up with a tax amount on the promotions that will ensure the state doesn't lose that money during this tight budget year and in the future.

The proposed changes come from recommendations of a task force that Johns said met for 17 months to get input from casino officials in other states. Johns, a member of the task force, said

a cross section of individuals representing widespread interests testified.

Riverboat licenses were first issued in 1991, and Johns said there have been no major changes in the law since then. However, they were allowed to quit sailing in 2001.

The changes are designed to promote economic development and improve safety on waterways, he said. Technology in the industry is changing, he said, and gambling machines are larger and more sophisticated.

Johns said the task force never considered increasing the number of gambling licenses and his bills don't expand gambling. The changes are designed to put Louisiana casinos on a level playing field with those in Oklahoma, Mississippi and Arkansas, he said.

"The one thing it (the legislation) doesn't do is expand the casino industry," Johns said. "It doesn't create any new licenses, it doesn't allow for internet gaming or any other forms of gaming such as sports betting.

"These bills were well thought out by a wide variety of people who served on the task force," he said.

Concerns about minority hiring and the use of minority businesses were the major views expressed by two members of the Senate Judiciary B Committee that heard the legislation.

Sens. Greg Tarver, D-Shreveport, and Karen Carter Peterson, D-New Orleans, said they weren't happy about the three riverboats in Shreveport and Bossier City not living up to their own voluntary quotas on the hiring of minorities and women.

Tarver said large corporations own all the casinos and they no longer have a Fair Share Program designed to improve the hiring of minority and women employees and to use minority businesses.

Written by Administrator

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L'auberge and Golden Nugget in Lake Charles promote themselves as resort destinations, Tarver said, but added the Shreveport casinos have never complemented other businesses or promoted other attractions in their communities.

Wayne Duty, Louisiana casino executive director, said riverboat casino goals are to hire 35 percent minorities and women and 75 percent local workers.

Peterson said the north Louisiana casinos are not meeting their own hiring goals. She said the Harrah's Casino in New Orleans struggles to do right and everybody deserves a fair shot.

"People at the top are not getting it," she said. She said procurement officers aren't doing their jobs and maybe they should all be replaced.

Tarver said procurement personnel should go out and find the minority vendors and most communities have African-American Chambers of Commerce that have that information.

Sen. J.P. Morrell, D-New Orleans, suggested deferring the Johns bills for a week. However, Johns said he wanted to get them out to the Senate and he would work with Tarver on the minority issues that concern him before the bill is debated.

"My word is my word," Johns said.

The bills were then sent to the Senate without opposition from the committee.

Two ministers spoke against the legislation, saying churches have to deal with the consequences of those who become addicted to gambling. They said casinos are never satisfied and will continually ask for more.

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Johns said casinos are the most regulated industries in the state. He said there has been no corruption and they have been scandal free.

The committee also approved two identical bills by Sen. Danny Martiny, R-Metairie. They are backups in the event problems cropped up with the others, he said.

Legislation setting up an election in Tangipahoa Parish to decide if citizens there want to relocate a Bossier City riverboat casino to their area was approved 2-1, and it also moves to the full Senate.

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