Written by Administrator
Monday, 08 November 2010 23:53 -

State legislative gaming committees are preparing to move quickly on Gov. Chris Christie's proposal to overhaul Atlantic City casino regulations, although one local legislator is urging caution.

State Sen. Jim Whelan, D-Atlantic, who chairs the Senate Committee on State Government, Wagering, Tourism and

Historic Preservation, said Monday that the governor's deregulation plan, which was reported by The Press of Atlantic City on Friday, may be introduced in time for committee hearings Monday.

"We're looking at it as soon as the 15th," he said. That would mean that if the bill gained committee approval, it could reach the full Senate on Nov. 22.

Republican members of the Assembly Regulatory Oversight and Gaming Committee said they expect to take up the legislation soon, but meeting dates have not been set.

Christie's staff has worked for months on the plan to significantly change casino regulations. The 200-page draft plan would rewrite portions of the Casino Control Act to limit the role of the Casino Control Commission, or CCC, to casino licensing. Meanwhile, the Division of Gaming Enforcement, or DGE, which investigates and enforces state gaming regulations, would take on many of the commission's responsibilities with respect to regulating the casinos.

One change being proposed would eliminate the requirement that state inspectors be present in the casinos at all times. Savings from the revamped system would be used to bolster promotion of and tourism development in Atlantic City's casino zone.

To have the bill possibly move through the Senate before Thanksgiving sounded good to Whelan.

"They haven't been introduced yet, but when they are, they're a priority," he said.

As expected, Whelan's committee held off action on a bill sponsored by Senate President Stephen Sweeney, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland, concerning operational changes and money-saving moves at the DGE.

Sweeney's bill focuses on privatizing two facets of the agency: the in-house DGE labs used to test slot machines before they are put on casino floors, and the fingerprinting labs that take records of all casino employees and applicants.

Sweeney also would have the DGE move out of its Trenton offices and relocate to Atlantic City.

"The bill that got pulled off today related to casino gambling will be incorporated into the broader bill the governor has proposed," Whelan announced at the end of the committee meeting.

That signaled Sweeney and Whelan were not likely to slow down Christie's plan, but build additional ideas into that proposal.

However, state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, raised what he called "concerns at multiple levels" about reorganizing regulations within the Casino Control Act.

"I have really five concerns," he said. "The first is keeping the integrity of the system, which for so long has been a model for the rest of the country on how to run casinos."

"Then there's the fiscal concern," he said. "I realize we have to save money, But I do wonder why we're cutting from the CCC when historically, the DGE has taken more raises, kept more vehicles and taken more trips, while the CCC has been making cuts for years, as far as I can see."

Van Drew also expressed concern about whether casino inspectors would lose their jobs in the

quest to find savings within the commission and division.

“I don’t mind losing a few top-of-the-tree people,” he said. “But we still need inspectors.”

Many live in his district, including some in Cumberland County, and make less than $40,000 per year, he said.

Van Drew said New Jersey’s regulatory system works differently and is funded differently than other states’ systems. In New Jersey, the casinos pay the full cost of regulation. Nevada, which the senator said funds regulation through taxpayers, uses fewer inspectors and more auditors, who catch errors after the fact.

“Our system is preventive,” Van Drew said.

Other lawmakers said Monday that they had not seen a full version of the bill and withheld comment.

But that did not stop at least one from expressing disagreement with moving sensitive enforcement duties from an independent state commission to a branch of a state department.

“I think that if the DGE takes over, that takes oversight,” said Assemblyman Ralph Caputo, D-Essex.

Contact Juliet Fletcher:

609-292-4935

JFletcher@pressofac.com

Powered by WizardRSS | **Full Text RSS Feeds**

Source: http://news.google.com/news/url?sa=t&fd=R&usg=AFQjCNHocI4BfbViMpEzjp2LBhFhviCi0A&url=http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/news/top_three/article_e42941ba-ebc4-11df-9c76-001cc4c03286.html