

Lawmakers put all cards on the table for casino legislation, wanting voters to decide

Written by Administrator

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RICHMOND, Va. -- Calling it their own “Amazon,” representatives from three regions are coming together in support of legislation to bring casinos to Virginia. But there are some in Richmond who are concerned about how this could impact families.

A series of bills ([HB2536](#) , [HB1890](#) , [SB1503](#) , [SB1126](#)) in the House and Senate would give the Virginia Lottery Board authority to regulate and oversee casinos.

There have been talks about projects in Bristol, Danville and [Portsmouth](#) , areas lawmakers and local leaders say need a boost. They announced their support for these projects together on Monday.

“We all have one thing in common and that is job opportunities and creating an economy for our people that we represent,” Sen. Bill Carrico (R-District 40) said.

RELATED: [Portsmouth now rolling the dice on bringing a casino to the city](#)

Economic impact studies conducted in all three communities estimate over 15,000 jobs would be created and nearly \$100 million in local tax revenue by the seventh year of a casino being open.

During a press conference today, the Mayor of Portsmouth confirmed a [site had been selected](#) for a casino project that would include a first class hotel and about a 140,000 square foot casino on this property next to the marina.

“You all know the challenges that the City of Portsmouth has had. You all know that we have limited resources. We really need to get a new dedicated revenue stream,” Del. Matthew James

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(D - District 80) said.

A \$175,000 [gambling study](#) was proposed in Gov. Ralph Northam's budget amendments. Sen. Louise Lucas (D - District 18) says she has mentioned her proposal to the governor and hopes that he hears them out.

"I'm hoping that [Northam's] going to understand what we have presented here today, is that these three different regions of the state deserve an opportunity to determine their own destiny," Lucas said.

The Portsmouth Democrat also said bringing a casino to her district would be like their "own Amazon," referencing the headquarters set to be built in Northern Virginia.

This legislation would also allow localities working on these projects to let residents decide on whether or not a casino can be built there, by putting it up as a ballot referendum. That means voters at the polls have the final say.

That's something the head of the Family Foundation of Virginia says is troubling, since those areas would also be impacted by the developments.

"The idea that Portsmouth is the only one that gets to vote when Suffolk and Chesapeake are, I mean, right next door is simply telling the people of Chesapeake, Suffolk and Virginia Beach that their voice doesn't matter," Victoria Cobb, President of the Family Foundation of Virginia, said.

Money from casino revenues would also be set aside for public safety and to help treat people with gambling addiction, per the legislation. There's also a part of it that would create a program for people to voluntarily put their names on a list so they couldn't enter a casino.

Cobb says that's not enough to mitigate the toll gambling addiction takes on families.

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“It’s one thing when people gamble and return home to another community but the reality is the people closest to the casino would get wrapped into the addiction too,” she added.

During the press conference, Sen. Carrico said if people don’t support having a casino in their community they can let their voice be heard.

“I probably won’t step foot in the casino but my personal convictions and their personal convictions are going to be able to be taken out at the [voting] booth,” Sen. Carrico said.

There’s also a [Constitutional Amendment](#) being proposed in the 2019 Legislative Session by Del. Brenda Pogge (R - District 96) that would require voters to decide on any casino legislation. This bill would have to pass the General Assembly this year and in 2020 before it is put on a ballot for voters to make the call on it.

There are two House bills and two Senate bills supported by lawmakers from each of these regions. If one passed the General Assembly this year, it would become law July 1. Then, localities could decide to put the referendum on a local ballot.

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