

Nebraska voters may vote on casino gambling

Written by Administrator

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[Nebraska voters](#) may decide next year whether to legalize casino gambling in a ballot measure that could tip the number of states that allow commercial gambling into the majority.

Supporters of legalized casinos have launched a petition drive to place the issue on the 2020 ballot with financial backing from the economic development corporation owned by the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska.

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Twenty-five states — including neighboring Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and South Dakota — allow commercial casino gambling with games such as slot machines, craps and roulette wheels, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Iowa casinos near Omaha, in particular, cater to Nebraska residents looking to gamble.

"Hundreds of millions of dollars go across the border every year," said Lance Morgan, the CEO of Ho-Chunk Inc., the corporation pushing the measure on the tribe's behalf. "For a Nebraskan to do gaming, you have to go half a mile. It's the height of paternalism to try to try to restrict it."

Morgan said he's confident, based on the group's internal polling, that voters will approve the measure if it appears on the ballot.

Only two states, Hawaii and Utah, have a complete ban on gambling. Nebraska is among states that allow Native American tribal casinos that are limited to bingo and card games where the

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house has no stake in the outcome, such as poker. Nebraska also offers keno, horse racing and a lottery. Commercial casinos, by contrast, have slot machines, craps, roulette wheels and card games such as blackjack.

The measure is certain to face opposition from leading conservatives, including Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts and former University of Nebraska football coach and athletic director Tom Osborne.

"Casinos are bad for families and bad for business," said Nate Grasz, policy director for the Nebraska Family Alliance, a conservative policy group that plans to fight the measure. "All men and women deserve an opportunity to build the best lives for themselves, and state-sanctioned gambling robs them of that opportunity."

Gambling opponents successfully defeated ballot measures in 2004 and 2006, despite being outspent by wealthy casino interests. In 2014, they challenged a gambling measure in court and persuaded the Nebraska Supreme Court to declare it unconstitutional, striking it from the ballot.

But some gambling opponents acknowledge public support has grown in recent years.

"It's going to be hard," said Pat Loontjer, executive director of Gambling with the Good Life. "We've been doing this for 24 years, and, well, the atmosphere in the state has changed."

Supporters said they've changed the ballot measure to withstand a court challenge. The latest campaign will require three petitions — a constitutional amendment to allow casino gambling at state-licensed horse racing tracks and two state law changes to regulate and tax the industry. The state Supreme Court rejected a previous measure because it merged those issues onto one ballot, forcing voters to give one yes-or-no answer to multiple questions.

"We've learned from our mistakes in the past," said Bob Moser, president of the Nebraska Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association. "We have a really good plan and great partners, and we're very optimistic about our chances this time."

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Moser said allowing casinos at state-licensed horse racing tracks would increase purse sizes and make horse races larger and more competitive, and thus revive the struggling industry.

A similar effort failed to gain enough signatures in 2016, but independent observers blame poor management, not a lack of support. The company that managed that petition drive claimed to have collected more than enough signatures, but nearly 42,000 were later declared invalid. The company now faces a lawsuit over the petition drive.

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