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COLUMBUS, Ohio — A high-stakes poker stare-down has emerged over the future of the Ohio Casino Control Commission, the newly minted group named to oversee the four casinos about to set up shop in the state.

Gov. Ted Strickland appointed the seven-member

bipartisan commission in October, a few weeks before the Democrat lost his bid for re-election.

The Republican-controlled Ohio Senate has the right to confirm or reject the appointments, and with Strickland on his way out, Senate President Bill Harris says he has no intention of letting Strickland's choices serve.

"If they don't resign, then we will take action," Harris said.

But the commission, led by Columbus attorney Charles "Rocky" Saxbe, says it will force Harris to play his hand. The group defiantly pressed on last week with its second meeting in 14 days, even though it realized its work could be cut short.

"If it is going to be a political purge," Saxbe said, "then get on with it."

The fate of the commission, which includes Cleveland attorney Vanessa Whiting, was thrown into doubt on Nov. 2, when Strickland lost the election to Republican John Kasich.

Kasich has urged Harris and the Senate to block all of the 200 or so unconfirmed appointments Strickland either has made or could make before he leaves office in early January -- especially those for the highly sought-after casino commission.

More than 200 people applied to the Strickland administration for the seven casino board slots.

"I don't think any of these appointments ought to be enacted in any sort of a lame-duck session," Kasich said in a statement released by his campaign team.

"Let me have the authority to do it," the governor-elect continued. "I should have people on there that I have confidence in. I'm going to have to live with the results."

A Kasich spokesman said the governor-elect does not yet know whom he would pick for the commission. In theory, he could pick some members selected by Strickland, though that is unlikely.

Kasich figures to use the appointments to put in faces familiar to him around state government.

Harris, a Republican from Ashland, said he is happy to carry out Kasich's wishes.

"This is not in any way derogatory toward the people that Gov. Strickland has appointed, but if they are key appointments . . . then we think that Governor-elect Kasich should get to make those appointments," Harris said.

Harris said he particularly feels strongly about the casino commission. He said that if Saxbe and his group do not quit soon, he will call the Senate together to reject each of the seven members.

"We are not going to drag this out for a long time," Harris said.

The Strickland administration called Harris' message to casino commission members flat-out partisan politics.

"These are honorable Ohioans, and for the Senate to outright reject these individuals without so much as considering their qualifications is pure politics at its worst," Strickland spokeswoman Amanda Wurst said.

She added that the Senate is going against the very protocol it endorsed in late 2006 when Republican Gov. Bob Taft was leaving office and Strickland was coming into office. The Republican-controlled Senate, also led by Harris, pushed through several Taft picks, and Strickland honored the appointments, Wurst said.

"The Senate appears ready to turn their back on tradition," Wurst said. "This isn't how they acted when Gov. Taft left office."

If the Senate does not take action before the end of the year, the appointments would be automatically approved. If the Senate rejects the appointments within 10 days of the end of the General Assembly session, Strickland would have no time to name a new round of appointees for consideration. That would leave the decision-making to Kasich.

The commission members are to be paid $60,000 for what is essentially part-time work, though the first year setting up the commission figures to be more like full-time work.

Ohio voters in 2009 approved a constitutional amendment allowing four full-fledged casinos to be built in Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati and Toledo. Cleveland Cavaliers majority owner Dan Gilbert controls the Cleveland and Cincinnati sites. Penn National Gaming controls the other two.

The commission is charged with picking an executive director and helping to build from scratch a 151-person state agency with a $14 million annual budget, paid for by gambling proceeds.

The commission will license and regulate casino operators, distribute gambling revenue and be a watchdog over the gambling industry. Ohio's four casinos, once all open, are estimated to gross $1.8 billion. The first casino could fully open in 2012.

Saxbe, a Republican and a Strickland campaign supporter, 'said he and the other commission members agreed to take on the challenge to ensure integrity for Ohio's casino economy and not to satisfy political motivations.

In addition to Whiting, a partner at the Roetzel & Andress law firm, other Democrats on the com mission are: Greta Russell, Ohio State University's controller and a certified public accountant; Joseph Rugola, president of the Ohio AFL-CIO; and former State Lottery Commission member Jerry Chabler, of suburban Toledo.

Besides Saxbe, Republicans members, both from Cincinnati, are lawyer William Kirkham and former Cincinnati police Sgt. John L. Wainscott.

The commission must include at least one attorney, one CPA and one person with law enforcement experience, and there can be no more than four people of the same political party, among other requirements.

"We didn't take an oath of office to resign just because some senator wants us to," Saxbe said. "At the same time, the Senate is certainly within its prerogative to not confirm us."

Saxbe also questioned whether Harris and Kasich understood the importance of the commission's work and the need to get an early start, as he has done.

During their first two meetings, commission members have discussed or heard presentations on their budget, hiring, accounting and auditing, construction and how to organize a search for an executive director, among other issues.

"Unless the Senate and the new governor take this seriously, then it is going to be the casinos who are going to run the timetable, and we are going to end up with casinos built and ready to open without people trained to regulate them and protect the public interest," Saxbe said.

Saxbe said he has not heard from Kasich. He said he invited Harris and other senators to the commission's meeting last Monday.

"I didn't even get the courtesy of a call telling us they weren't coming," he said. "I get the message. I get it. But there are no professional courtesies in the current atmosphere being exhibited."

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