

Keno changes removed from casino bill; truancy diversion narrowly advances

Written by Administrator
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Nebraska lawmakers made a last-minute change Monday to a bill on voter-approved casinos at racetracks, delaying final approval and leaving at least one more battle to be fought on the subject. And a proposal to send juveniles who frequently miss school to diversion programs instead of juvenile court advanced, with a razor-thin majority.

Voters approved a state constitutional amendment to allow casinos at racetracks last November. That left it up to the Legislature to pass legislation specifying how those casinos would operate and be regulated. In public hearings earlier this year, some people who run existing gambling operations involving keno, a game played at many bars and restaurants across the state, expressed concern that they would be hurt by the competition, and asked for changes in how they are allowed to operate. Instead of being required to sell tickets for cash and have players fill them out on paper, they want people to be able to play and pay on their phones. Despite opposition from Gov. Pete Ricketts, lawmakers have approved making that change through two rounds of voting. But Monday, with the bill up for its third and final approval, Speaker of the Legislature Sen. Mike Hilgers moved to take the changes to keno rules out of the bill. Hilgers said since the legislation modifies something passed by voters, it would take two-thirds of the Legislature, or 33 votes, to pass.

“Keno was not part of the expanded gaming that was passed by voters and there are a large number of members in this body who on principle oppose expanding keno. And I am not convinced – in fact, more likely than not I believe there are not 33 votes on final reading to pass this if that keno portion that expands keno is in this particular bill. And that is not the tail that should wag this particular dog,” Hilgers said.

Sen. Tom Briese, chair of the General Affairs Committee, agreed. Briese said the bill contains important requirements.

“We’re requiring sports betting to take place in the casino itself in a designated area. We’re prohibiting the use of credit cards. We’re requiring licensees to establish a verifiable procedure to demonstrate that they can prohibit the use of credit cards. We’re prohibiting betting on high school games or below, prohibiting proposition betting and in-game betting on Nebraska games. We’re doing several things to help facilitate responsible implementation of this ballot proposal. These items are too important to jeopardize,” Briese said.

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Sen. Steve Lathrop argued for keeping the changes to keno in the bill. Lathrop said taxes from keno operations are important to cities like Ralston, which borders on Omaha where a casino will be built at Horsemen's Park.

"For Ralston, keno represents about 10 percent of their receipts – 10 percent of their revenue. And they gotta compete with a casino going in 10 blocks to the east," Lathrop said.

Senators voted 27-11 for Hilgers' amendment to take keno changes out of the bill. That means it will have to lay over at least one day before it can come up again for a final vote. And Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks indicated she will try to change it at that point, restricting the ability to bet on events like Nebraska football games.

"We're considered the best fans in the world. But boy, when we add betting to it, we're going to be screaming about them taking a knee. We're going to be screaming about them making a decision not to run up the score. And, I think it's wrong," Pansing Brooks said.

Monday afternoon, senators debated LB658, a proposal by Pansing Brooks to remove truancy, by itself, as a reason for sending someone to juvenile court. Instead, young people would be sent to diversion programs first. Among those supporting the proposal was Sen. Terrell McKinney, who said it was a way to try to block the "school-to-prison pipeline."

"A lot of kids that miss school a lot more than likely have issues in the home that aren't being addressed. They may be going to sleep without lights, water, food. They may have seen things the night before that causes them not to go to school the next day. That's what we have to think about. It shouldn't be 'Oh, this kid missed school. Let's sit him in front of the courts.' It makes no sense," McKinney said.

Speaking against the bill, Sen. Julie Slama said she wasn't trying to force kids into the court system.

"The opponents of LB658 just want to see a system where county attorneys – where our judicial system -- has the option to intervene early, and to ensure that truancy is the behavior that

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doesn't escalate to these kids being in front of the judge, a few weeks later, for misdemeanors and a few months down the line for felonies. It's getting early intervention and as they always say...an ounce of intervention is worth a pound of treatment," Slama said.

Senators voted to give the bill first round approval, with 25 senators – the minimum required – voting in favor, while 19 were opposed.

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