

With Atlantic City's uncertain future in mind, the New Jersey Senate approved by wide margins Monday legislation that would create a state-run casino and entertainment district and loosen casino

regulations.

Passage of the measures virtually gives Gov. Christie the green light to begin an unprecedented takeover of Atlantic City and its struggling gaming industry. Since the opening of the first Pennsylvania casino in November 2006, the Shore resort has continued to bleed revenues, jobs, and investors.

Approved by a vote of 24-9 was the first bill, S-11, which would create a special Atlantic City Tourism District and expand marketing of the resort. The second bill, S-12, which would revise casino regulations and shift regulatory authority from the state Casino Control Commission to the New Jersey Division of Gaming Enforcement, was approved, 22-13.

The measures represent significant changes to the way the nation's second largest gambling market has done business for more than three decades, and they mirror recommendations announced by Christie on July 21, when he unveiled his plan for a sweeping overhaul of Atlantic City.

They now head to the state Assembly for final consideration on Jan. 6 and, if approved, to the governor's desk to be signed into law.

Supporters of the bills say they will enhance visits to Atlantic City and encourage investment by streamlining regulations and reducing redundancies.

"The future of Atlantic City and the future of casino gambling in New Jersey are forever intertwined, and the bills which were approved by the Senate today are a strong first step to ensuring economic stability and vibrancy moving forward," said Sen. Jim Whelan (D., Atlantic), chair of the Senate State Government, Wagering, Tourism, and Historic Preservation Committee.

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"The bills would also revise some of the onerous regulatory burdens, which hamper economic growth within the casino industry and discourage new investors from entering into the market," Whelan added.

Monday's Senate action followed the Assembly's approval a week ago of a package of seven bills to boost Atlantic City gambling and the state's horseracing industry, including expanding off-track wagering and putting sports betting on the November 2011 ballot.

"These bills continue our effort to boost Atlantic City and get back the jobs lost due to increased competition from neighboring states and the economic recession," said Sen. Ray Lesniak, (D., Union), prime sponsor of bills to legalize sports betting and Internet wagering, such as poker, at Atlantic City casinos.

Christie had wanted the full package of Atlantic City reforms passed by the end of Monday, but the Assembly balked and put off the votes until early next month, when it returns from holiday recess.

"This legislation demonstrates a bipartisan commitment to Atlantic City and recognizes the economic engine the industry is for the entire state," said Robert Griffin, president of the Casino Association of New Jersey and chief executive officer of Trump Entertainment Resorts Inc.

Atlantic City's 11 casinos employ about 38,000, pay almost \$1.7 billion in annual wages, spend nearly \$2 billion a year to purchase goods and services, and annually pay more than \$900 million in state and local taxes and fees that go toward government programs for the state's senior and disabled citizens, according to the association, the umbrella group that lobbies on the casinos' behalf in Trenton.

Among other things, Griffin said, the new state-run casino and entertainment district could:

Address the safety and cleanliness of Atlantic City's streets and the Boardwalk;

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Improve investment in joint marketing to boost tourism;

Attract more convention activities and visitors;

Attract more tourists and families by making Atlantic City more of a destination resort, and

Spur investment in more non-gaming amenities.

"If this legislation is passed, it will create an environment that will allow New Jersey's casino resorts to continue to be a net positive for the state of New Jersey," said Griffin, whose company owns the three Trump casinos in Atlantic City, all of which reported revenue declines last month.

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