

Casino debate resumes in NH

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CONCORD – Sen. Lou D’Allesandro, the lead sponsor of a bill to authorize two casinos in New Hampshire, calls himself the new Larry Pickett, after the architect of the state Lottery back in 1964.

It took 10 years for Pickett, a lawmaker from Keene, to see his lottery bill become law. D’Allesandro, D-Manchester, has now sponsored a casino bill for 16 years.

“This thing has been examined and re-examined,” he said Tuesday in introducing his bill. “I feel like a cardiologist.”

If the senator feels like a cardiologist, then “this bill is Frankenstein,” quipped Steve Duprey, of Casino Free NH.

Duprey said casino gambling is like “crack cocaine” for cash-strapped legislatures. He said it is an erratic source of revenue and casinos would hurt entertainment venues statewide, such as the Capitol Center for the Arts in Concord.

Rep. Patricia Lovejoy, D-Stratham, testified that the legislation would open the doors to more than two casinos in the state.

“No legislature can bind a future legislature,” Lovejoy said. “This is a gimmick, a feel-good provision, and one that’s been tried before.”

The casino bill would authorize two casinos with up to 5,000 slot machines and up to 240 table games. It proposes a larger casino with a license fee of \$80 million, and a smaller casino license at a fee of \$40 million.

D’Allesandro said communities statewide would benefit from an estimated \$25 million in revenue sharing.

The bill would establish a gaming enforcement unit in the Division of State Police. It would earmark 3 percent of gross slot revenues, for a projected \$10 million, to the casino host community. It would give 1 percent, or a little more than \$3 million, to abutting communities, the host county, and to the state Department of Health and Human Services for problem gambling.

For its estimates in the bill's fiscal note, the New Hampshire Department of Revenue Administration assumes revenues realized in Fiscal Year 2019.

The NH Association of Chiefs of Police remains against the bill, but the New Hampshire Police Association and the NH Troopers Association support it. The NH Building Trades Council favors it as a job creator and economic development.

John Zudell, vice president of operations for New Hampshire Motor Speedway, supports the casino legislation. If it passes, NHMS intends to apply for a casino license.

"We believe a casino project such as this provides us a new competitive edge in keeping both our coveted NASCAR Sprint Cup dates in New Hampshire," Zudell says in testimony given to the Senate Ways & Means Committee.

The League of Women Voters of NH opposed it because, League representative Sally Davis said, "It violates basic principles of sound tax policy."

She said gambling markets have reached saturation and the industry is in decline.

Duprey also said casinos in nearby Massachusetts would erode some of the projected revenues of a proposed casino in New Hampshire, as well as make it more of a local facility.

Supporters said the legislation would not affect New Hampshire's brand because of its notable tourism industry and that it would protect existing charitable gaming operators.

Rep. John Clotier, D-Claremont, rose to speak in support of the casino bill. Ten years ago, he noted, he would have spoken against it. "Why did I change my mind? Because I listened to my constituents," he said.

Sponsors of the bill include Senate President Chuck Morse, R-Salem, and Senate Democratic Leader Jeff Woodburn, D-Dalton. Gov. Maggie Hassan, D-Exeter, supports expanded gambling. She has previously supported legalizing one highly regulated casino in the southern part of the state.

The state House of Representatives has never passed a casino bill, but it came close last session, ultimately killing one casino bill on a [173-172 vote](#).

(The Senate Ways & Means Committee hearing on the bill is continuing Tuesday morning. This post will be updated after the hearing concludes.)