

The state Senate postponed a key vote Thursday (2-18-16) on a bill that would allow a multimillion-dollar casino complex at Rockingham Park in Salem. If passed, Senate Bill 551 would legalize expanded gambling in New Hampshire after numerous attempts failed over the past several decades.

The legislation, sponsored by Sen. Lou D'Allesandro, D-Manchester, would also bring up to 3,500 lottery video machines and 160 table games to the 110-year-old former racetrack. The Senate was poised to vote on the bill Thursday until Sen. Jeb Bradley, R-Wolfeboro, made a motion to table the legislation. That motion passed, effectively putting the bill on hold and spurring a rumor on social media that it could be dead for the remainder of the legislative session.

Expanded gambling legislation has passed in the Senate on several occasions in recent years before being defeated in the 400-member House of Representatives.

D'Allesandro said after the session in Concord on Thursday that supporters of the bill in the 24-member Senate decided to ask that the legislation be tabled because an ardent proponent, Sen. Bette Lasky, R-Nashua, was ill and could not attend. "One of our key votes wasn't there," D'Allesandro said. "She's been very sick. We're working every day for votes."

Although finding enough votes in the House remains the biggest challenge, D'Allesandro said supporters of the bill don't want to take any chances. The Senate Ways and Means Committee has recommended the bill be passed. "With the House, you never know what will happen," D'Allesandro said.

Last year, Senate Bill 113 — also sponsored by D'Allesandro — sailed through the Senate and was killed in the House, 208-156. The legislation called for two casinos in the state.

Only a year earlier, similar legislation that passed the Senate also met defeat in the House, but only by a single vote, 173-172.

Unlike previous bills, SB 551 specifically states where the casino would be — Rockingham Park. Many expanded gambling supporters have said The Rock would be an ideal location because it's been a popular entertainment venue for more than a century and would lure plenty of out-of-state customers across the border. A casino at Rockingham Park would create hundreds of jobs and millions of dollars in annual revenue for the state, Salem and surrounding communities, according to D'Allesandro and Senate President Chuck Morse, R-Salem. "I think there is significant support throughout the state," D'Allesandro said of the casino proposal. That support is especially strong in Salem, he said. Three years ago, 81 percent of Salem residents who participated in a nonbinding referendum said they supported establishment of a casino at the racetrack.

Millennium Gaming of Las Vegas has had an option to buy the 170-acre property to build a \$650 million casino complex that would include a 300-room hotel. Last year, local restaurateur Joseph Faro purchased 50 acres of the property and recently unveiled a major redevelopment plan for the site.

Morse, a co-sponsor of SB 551, said tabling a vote on the bill was in the best interests of everyone. Expanded gambling would be beneficial to the state and Salem, he said. Morse and Edward Callahan, president and general manager of Rockingham Park, have said New Hampshire's failure to adopt expanded gambling would be a boon to those establishing casinos in Massachusetts. Callahan could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Morse said even if a casino never comes to Rockingham Park, the site is still a prime location for future economic development.

"The net benefit is still there," he said. "We still have opportunities in Salem with that whole 170-acre parcel."

D'Allesandro said it's not known when SB 551 will be discussed again this session. The Senate has recessed until March 3.