

Senate spins wheel on expanded gambling

By Jim Ash

Florida Capital Bureau Chief

TALLAHASSEE -- Over the heated objections of religious conservatives, the Senate voted today to allow slot machines at every race track and jai-alai fronton in Florida, although the bill's fate is far from certain.

"I just want to rise in defense of communities," said Sen. Ronda Storms, R-Brandon. "Like cancer, it creeps everywhere and then you have an endless expansion of gambling."

Storms warned that the state's sheriffs are opposed.

"They do understand the increase of crime," she said.

The measure (SB 1380) by Dennis Jones, R-Seminole, passed 27-11.

Noting that the measure could raise between \$354 million and \$500 million for education, Jones countered that crime fell an average of 7.3 percent in Broward County when gambling was expanded there. As much as \$3 million in gambling revenue is dedicated to increased law enforcement, making the establishments "the safest place to be," Jones said.

"Quite frankly, crime has gone down where we have expanded gambling," Jones said. "That's a win-win not only for the state, that's a win-win for your constituents."

The measure would allow Class II slot machines at 20 horse and dog tracks and

jai-alai frontons outside of Miami-Dade and Broward counties. Unlike Las-Vegas style slot machines, Class II machines have smaller pay outs and gamblers play against each other, not the house.

But Jones's bill faces an uphill battle. House Speaker Marco Rubio told reporters yesterday that even though lawmakers are frantically searching for ways to trim the budget by \$3.7 billion, he will not consider using gambling revenues to ease the pain.

Gov. Charlie Crist recently signed a compact with the Seminole Tribe of Florida that would give them exclusive rights to Las Vegas style gambling in their casinos, and the state could lose \$100 million a year from that deal if competitors are allowed to do the same.

The Senate also voted 25-12 to approve a measure (SB 970) by Democratic Leader Steve Geller of Cooper City that would reduce state tax rates for Broward County slot machines from 50 percent to 35 percent in exchange for a guarantee of an eventual \$123 million in education funding.

Geller pitched the idea as economic development.

"At a 50 percent tax rate it is unlikely they will open," Geller said.