

## Racetrack slots win in Senate

By Jim Ash  
And Donna Balancia

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

The measure (SB 1380), sponsored by Dennis Jones, R-Seminole, passed 27-11. But Jones' bill could face an uphill battle in the Florida House.

Pat Biddix, general manager of the Melbourne Greyhound Park, said he was familiar with the bill, noting, "We're hoping to get some form of additional gaming."

The Melbourne dog-racing track already has a poker room for its patrons, in addition to offering wagering on dog races, horse races and jai alai.

But others are opposed to the measure to expand gambling options.

"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.

Noting that the bill could raise \$354 million to \$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 payouts, and gamblers play against each other, not the house.

Biddix said, when it comes to gaming, state legislative action typically occurs late in the session.

In addition to this proposal, Biddix said there several other bills being considered by the Florida Legislature, but those deal with video lottery terminals.

He said there is a likelihood a bill allowing some form of expanded gambling will get through the Legislature.

House Speaker Marco Rubio told reporters that, even though lawmakers are 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 the Seminoles 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.

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