

## Economy could push lawmakers to bet on gaming

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Grim state finances could create a golden opportunity for pro-gaming lawmakers hoping to gain ground in a state once known as an anti-gambling stronghold.

Florida legislators will head into their 2008 session this week with a shrinking budget and a raft of gambling bills. Up for consideration: expanding slot machines across the state, lowering industry taxes, regulating "gray market" arcade-style adult games that contribute little in taxes and creating a new Department of Gaming Control to oversee it all.

Gov. Charlie Crist apparently has the fever, too. His budget proposal relies on driving up state lottery ticket sales and using new income from a still-disputed gambling deal he struck with the Seminole Tribe to expand games at its seven Florida casinos.

What's fueling the latest push for all things gambling?

"The only reason there is any realistic chance of passing these bills is because of the economy. . . . We need the money so desperately," said Sen. Steve Geller, a Broward County Democrat who for years has led the charge toward more gambling.

Any conversation about more gambling, though, will exclude the more conservative House. Speaker Marco Rubio, a Miami

Republican, is staunchly against expansion and the two men designated to be House speakers after him, Rep. Ray Sansom of Destin and Rep. Dean Cannon of Winter Park, are equally fervent opponents.

They won't support a budget that relies on increased gambling money, they say, but they face a budget that may be \$4 billion lower than the one approved last year.

Not all the gambling-related bills would actually generate more cash for the state. Some are aimed at tax-relief for the gambling industry. Others would help ensure more humane treatment for racing greyhounds or allow televised high-stakes poker games at card rooms. The result, though, is a lot of room for negotiation and trading. As Gulfstream Park lobbyist Marc Dunbar put it: "This year, everybody needs something."

Add the lousy economy to the mix and the result is a rush to file gambling bills.

"This is definitely their best shot," said Bill Bunkley, lobbyist for the Florida Baptist Convention, which opposes gambling. "There is fresh meat in the water, and sharks. It's a feeding frenzy."

Last year, even before the depth of the economic downturn became apparent, pro-gambling causes won substantial legislative victories: more slot machines at Broward casinos; bigger poker pots at card rooms;

wagering on dominoes; longer hours for casinos; ATMs on site.

An additional measure that would have expanded the slot machine option now running in Miami-Dade and Broward counties to every dog track, horse track and jai-alai fronton in the state failed -- but it's back again this year.

Now, with the economic forecast getting bleaker and Crist's agreement with the Seminoles giving the tribe an edge in the marketplace, lawmakers can make the argument that gambling money is the cure for what ails Florida's budget.

"It certainly is the perfect storm for Sen. Geller to make the case that this is the end-all savior type of legislation to help fill state coffers -- but that's a losing bet," Bunkley said. "We hope the Legislature will see that, even though it's going to be very enticing to rely on increased lottery drawings and other gambling."

That's where Rubio comes in. The House speaker, in an interview with The Miami Herald, declared that the House would reject any attempt to expand the state-run lottery or authorize bingo-style slots at dog and horse tracks and jai-alai frontons except for those already approved by voters in Broward and Miami-Dade.

More gambling might offer a short-term fix, he said, but would ultimately dig a deeper budget hole for Florida because he believes gambling revenues will remain stagnant while state costs for education, social services and other needs will rise.

He also argued that Florida's gamblers are predominantly local residents who wager with disposable income they would spend elsewhere if slots didn't exist.

"If they spend it on a slot machine, all they're doing is transferring it from one part

of the economy to another. . . . No one's talking about that part," Rubio said.

"Seventy percent of Americans live within three hours of a casino. No one is going to get on an airplane to come to Florida to play at a dog track or a horse track."

Another major player in the state opposed to more gambling is Walt Disney World.

"We remain opposed to the expansion of gambling in the state," Disney spokeswoman Zoraya Suarez said Friday. "We're a family market."

Analysts say Florida has one of the most competitive gambling markets in the country, with much of the action concentrated in South Florida. The Seminoles, under the new state agreement still under court challenge, rolled out Las Vegas-style slots in January, with card games like blackjack to follow within months.

Broward has three of its four permitted slots operations running; in Miami-Dade, voters just approved three more. Across the state, there are 20 additional dog and horse tracks and jai-alai frontons, many with card rooms. The state has approved two new quarter horse tracks in North Florida with another application still being processed. Gambling cruises-to-nowhere regularly depart from Florida ports, and then there's the lottery.

With all of that, a few bills aim to curb gambling or regulate it more. Lawmakers in both the House and Senate have said they want to crack down on adult arcades, the storefront "gray market" operations that use penny-ante machines for wagering but skirt anti-gambling laws by awarding winnings with gift cards, not cash.

Other bills include a provision to help ensure humane treatment of racing greyhounds and another to regulate the number of quarter horse tracks allowed by

setting a minimal distance between them. Currently, there is no distance requirement, although thoroughbred tracks and dog tracks must be at least 100 miles apart and jai-alai frontons must be at least 50 miles apart.

And, finally, there's a bill sponsored by Rep. David Rivera, a pro-slots Miami Republican who says he wants to revoke authorization for the state lottery and the slots -- and put both questions on the state ballot.

Rivera says he's trying to force a discussion of whether gambling money is a legitimate source of state revenue.

"The fact is, Florida's budget is addicted to gambling," he said. "The only way to deal with Florida's gambling addiction is to either eliminate it cold turkey or manage it responsibly."