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Video slot bill hits floor of Senate today

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TALLAHASSEE — The Florida Senate is scheduled to vote today on a bill that would allow all pari-mutuels in the state to operate video slot machines, which supporters say would contribute millions of dollars to public schools.

But the proposal faces an uphill battle in the House where GOP leaders are refusing to back down from their rejection of an expansion of gambling to bail out the state's dismal finances. "We're not going to pass a video lottery bill in the Florida House," House Speaker Marco Rubio, R-West Miami, said definitively on Wednesday.

Legislative approval is pivotal for a redevelopment plan in Palm Beach County.

The owners of the Palm Beach Kennel Club have ambitious plans for their 60-acre property at Belvedere Road and Congress Avenue - a casino, airport hotel, jai-lai and concert venue, and shopping and dining area, all linked to an airport rental car garage by a monorail.

It would be a gem for the overlooked Westgate neighborhood next to Palm Beach International Airport, an area that the county is eager to redevelop, Commissioner Jeff Koons said.

But Kennel Club President Patrick Rooney Jr. has said his redevelopment plans hinge on gaining state permission to expand gambling offerings beyond

dog races and poker. Slots revenue would make the project feasible.

Koons said the bill might still be revived in the House as budget wrangling progresses, despite Rubio's remarks. Given a choice between cutting health services and allowing expanded gambling at existing tracks, he thinks the choice will be easier.

This year, the state budget shortfall is unusually bleak, giving Koons hope that lightning might strike by session's end.

"In the last four or five days of the session, they're going to look at the budget. They're going to look at their shortfall. And they'll say, 'Hey, here's an option, whatever you want to use it for. Public health? Schools?'"

And if slots don't pass, Koons said, some elements of the redevelopment plan - a hotel, a parking and rental car complex - will still be needed.

The monorail may yet live.

"Airports are an economic driver," Koons said. "Here's the airport in an eastern section of a fast-growing, rich county like Palm Beach County, and we're doing large amounts of economic redevelopment. If the gambling franchise doesn't continue, that property has real value. I think the Rooneys are sitting on a very valuable piece of property."