

Senate OKs expanding gambling statewide

By Linda Kleindienst

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TALLAHASSEE - Covetously eyeing the hundreds of millions it could bring into state coffers, the Florida Senate on Thursday approved a plan to expand gambling statewide.

The senators also voted yes to a plan to lower tax rates on slot machines in Broward County to help their owners compete against the Seminole Tribe's casinos.

The future of both bills is questionable -- House Speaker Marco Rubio adamantly opposes any expansion of gambling in Florida. But proponents said the package of bills would help the state's struggling pari-mutuels, some of which have operated in Florida for more than 70 years.

The plan would allow all pari-mutuels in the state to operate video lottery terminals, a type of slot-like machine that operates like a bingo game, with players competing against each other. They are not the same as the Las Vegas-style slots, which offer bigger payouts and have players compete against the house. The Vegas slots are now operating in three Broward pari-mutuels and are allowed in seven Indian casinos across the state.

"The time has come to help our good corporate citizens," said Sen. Dennis Jones, R-St. Petersburg, who is chairman

of the Senate's Business Regulation Committee.

The video lottery bill, sponsored by Jones and expected to raise up to \$500 million a year for public schools, passed the Senate in a 27-11 vote.

The tax break measure sponsored by Senate Democratic Leader Steve Geller, D-Cooper City, would reduce the tax on Broward's slot machines from 50 percent to 35 percent. It passed the Senate 25-12. "At 50 percent, the pari-mutuels are losing money or just breaking even," Geller said. "If the Indians get additional gambling and the pari-mutuels don't, I'd expect at least one or possibly all three to close."

The Indian slots are not taxed, but a compact the tribe signed with Gov. Charlie Crist guarantees a \$150 million-a-year payment to the state.

While Broward voters approved slot machines at the county's four pari-mutuel facilities, only three have so far chosen to install them - Gulfstream Park and Mardi Gras Race Track and Gaming, both of Hallandale Beach, and The Isle Casino in Pompano Beach. Geller said Dania Jai-Alai, and three pari-mutuels in Miami-Dade County recently authorized by voters to install the slot machines, are likely not to do so unless the tax rate goes down.