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Senate Passes Bill To Expand Slot Machines

By Nicola M. White

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TALLAHASSEE - Slot machines at the dog track?

Don't bet on it.

The issue, however, at least gained traction with the Senate on Thursday, when lawmakers passed two bills that would expand the state's gambling options.

One bill would open the door for places like St. Petersburg's Derby Lane to have one-armed bandits as part of their gambling attractions. The other calls for those bingo-style slot machines to be taxed at a lower rate than the government currently collects.

Only Broward and Miami-Dade counties allow slots outside of Seminole Indian casinos. The slots are not the kind found in Las Vegas casinos, which pit players against the house, but are styled more like a game of bingo, with players playing against each other.

Last year, the tribe signed a deal with the state to allow Las Vegas slots, which gambling enthusiasts say are more exciting and offer bigger jackpots. The Seminole deal also would bring in card games like blackjack and baccarat.

It's hard for Broward and Miami-Dade counties' parimutuels - places like horse and greyhound tracks and jai alai frontons - to compete with Seminole

casinos, said Sen. Steve Geller, D-Hallandale Beach. So he wants to lower the tax burden on those establishments, by having the state collect 35 percent instead of 50.

"They can't operate at a 50 percent tax rate," Geller said.

Lowering the rate would allow those places to stay in business, he said.

The staying-in-business argument was also pushed by Sen. Dennis Jones, R-Seminole, who argued for legislation that would allow all parimutuel facilities - regardless of location - to have slots.

He called the greyhound tracks and jai-alai frontons "good corporate citizens." That's why they should be allowed to have bingo-style slot machines, he said - so they can continue to make money while facing increased competition from Seminole Indian casinos.

Don't bust out the quarters just yet, though.

Geller's proposal on the tax rate, which passed with a 25-12 vote, has a similar plan floating in the House. The bill sponsored by Jones to expand slots throughout the state, however, has no House counterpart yet - a telling sign that the bill might not go anywhere.

Other factors also could hold up Jones' plan: opposition from the Seminole

Indian tribe and from House leaders. House Speaker Marco Rubio, R-Coral Gables, has been hostile to any idea of expanding gambling.

Also, tribe attorney Barry Richard said if other venues were allowed to operate slots, the tribe likely would consider the deal broken and payments to the state would stop.

State analysts disagree, saying the bill is clear that the games that could be offered under Jones' plan would not conflict with the Seminole gaming compact.

Others make arguments about gambling and its effects on crime and general quality of life issues. Sen. Ronda Storms, R-Valrico, told the Senate that if the bill passed, it would allow other gambling in the state.

"Like a cancer it creeps everywhere," she said.

Still, at least one of the Tampa Bay area's oldest gambling establishments welcomes the legislation.

"Over the past five years we have lost several of our kennels and many of our top greyhounds have gone to tracks that have slot machines and casino-type gaming like West Virginia and Ohio," said Vera Filipelli, spokeswoman for Derby Lane, a greyhound track that has operated since 1925.

Last year, the Tampa Greyhound track in Sulphur Springs did away with dog racing altogether, saying it wasn't lucrative enough when customers could hop on Interstate 4 and head to the Hard Rock Casino instead. The track is now focusing on simulcast racing and poker.

Jones' bill passed 27-11.

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