



Florida Senate draws plan that could allow slots at Fort Pierce Jai Alai

By Michael Peltier

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Visitors to the Fort Pierce Jai Alai would be allowed to play video slot machines under a bill passed by the Florida Senate.

But backers acknowledge they may face a stacked deck in the 120-member House, where leaders have traditionally held a much stronger anti-gambling stance.

Still they are not folding just yet.

By a 27-11 vote, Senators on Thursday agreed to allow limited video slot machine gambling at the state's existing pari-mutuel facilities. Backers say the measure would close the gap between these facilities, Indian casinos and higher stakes games now authorized for Miami-Dade and Broward Counties.

They also cautioned that failure to allow an additional revenue source for the state's 18 pari-mutuels could lead to closures of some parks.

"Some of these pari-mutuels have been good corporate citizens in our state for 50 sometimes 75 years," said Senate sponsor Jones, R-Seminole.

Critics say allowing the tracks and jai alai frontons to add video terminals is simply another expansion of gambling in a state in which residents outside of South Florida have repeatedly opposed more gaming.

"I oppose any expansion of gambling in the state," said Rep. Gayle Harrell, R-Stuart. "If a bill comes over to the House,

I'll do everything I can to make sure it doesn't pass."

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. The machines are expected to arrive at the Brighton location southwest of Okeechobee in the next couple of months.

The measure approved by the Senate 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.

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.

Benny Colette, chairman of Florida Gaming Corp and owner of the Fort Pierce fronton, could not be reached for comment Friday.

The proposal would allow existing pari-mutuel facilities to operate up to 2,000 machines. Owners would pay a \$3 million a year license fee and be taxed at a 35-percent rate.

State economists estimate that expanding slot machines to the facilities would provide nearly \$260 million in tax revenue a year by 2011.

There is currently no House companion to the measure, but backers are hoping to incorporate it into other gaming measures.

Florida Today contributed to this report.