

Florida Senate bills raise gambling stakes

By Evan S. Benn

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TALLAHASSEE --

Poker rooms could stay open later and dormant jai-alai frontons could become greyhound racetracks under two bills that won approval from a Senate committee Tuesday.

The poker bill paves the way for high-stakes and celebrity tournaments at parimutuels and would expand gaming to 18 hours a day on weekdays and 24 hours a day on weekends. Current law allows card rooms to operate for no more than 12 hours a day.

The bill, sponsored by Senate Minority Leader Steve Geller, would also allow parimutuels to host and broadcast celebrity or charity poker tournaments like the ones that have become television mainstays in recent years. They could also have high-stakes tournaments in which up to 1,000 players each pay up to \$10,000 in entry fees.

"You have tournaments that are spread across the world, in Las Vegas, Atlantic City, but currently those tournaments are illegal in Florida," said Geller, a Hallandale Beach Democrat. "We think this is a great way of generating free publicity for the state."

The high-stakes tournaments would be allowed twice a year, and the charity or celebrity tournaments would be allowed six times a year under Geller's bill. The legislation requires parimutuel facilities to give at least 70 percent of proceeds from the celebrity events to qualified charities.

Geller attempted to pass similar legislation about expanding card room hours last year, but he said the measure failed in the House.

The Senate Regulated Industries Committee voted 8-2 in favor of the bill, which now faces two more committees. A House companion has not yet been heard by any panels in that chamber.

A separate bill sponsored by state Sen. Dave Aronberg, a Greenacres Democrat, won 10-0 approval from the Regulated Industries Committee on Tuesday.

Aronberg's bill would allow some jai-alai frontons to convert their parimutuel permits to greyhound racing, so long as the facilities have not hosted any jai-alai games within 10 years.

There are other criteria jai-alai facilities must meet in order to be considered for the dog-racing permit, including having no more than two parimutuels in the county. As a result, the only facilities that would be eligible are Palm Beach Jai-Alai, Volusia Jai-Alai and Tampa Jai-Alai.

Although Aronberg said dog racing is more popular than jai-alai, the bill is being opposed by the International Jai-Alai Players Association.

"The players want to play," said Douglas Russell, a lobbyist for the association. "They see the loss of a permit, even an inactive permit, as the loss of their ability to eventually play jai-alai. They see it as a threat against their sport, which is the oldest professional sport in the state of Florida."