

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Bill would close internet cafes

'I call it an infestation of storefront casinos,' Rep. Scott Plakon said

[By Bill Cotterell](#) • Florida Capital Bureau • Published: July 06, 2011 2:00AM

Calling Leon County "the poster child" for the rapid spread of Internet cafes, a Central Florida legislator has filed a bill to shut them down statewide.

"I call it an infestation of storefront casinos," Rep. Scott Plakon, R-Longwood, said Tuesday.

Cities and counties all over Florida have dealt with varying local ordinances regarding the cafes, which sell phone cards and Internet access along with participation in "sweepstakes." Operators claim they serve people who don't have home computers and that their activities are similar to scratch-off games at fast-food restaurants.

Sarah Bascom, a Tallahassee public-relations woman who represents a group of Internet-cafe operators, said local governments can adequately handle the situation. She said "banning these legal businesses is unnecessary."

Plakon said his proposed bill (HB 3) has a good chance of passage next year with support by the Florida League of Cities and prosecutors, police chiefs and sheriffs associations. His initial attempt at a ban died in a House committee this year.

"The poster child for the need of this is Leon County, which I believe two years ago had none and now has, I believe, about 25 Internet cafes," Plakon said.

The county commission last month adopted regulations requiring security guards at the establishments. Sheriff Larry Campbell said officers had about 70 calls for various offenses or disturbances at the cafes in recent months.

The commission also is watching what other local governments do, possibly adding new restrictions to the ordinance.

Plakon and Rep. Dennis Baxley, R-Ocala, proposed a total ban on the operations. Their bill states, as a finding of fact, that easy access to online gambling can trigger compulsive gambling addiction in some people.

"The social problems are starting to happen from the convenience of it. They target low-income and elderly people, particularly," said Plakon.

He scoffed at the argument that the businesses are only selling online computer time.

"That's ridiculous on its face. If you went in there and saw 100 people, I doubt you could find one who is checking their email," said Plakon. "This is, if not gambling directly, it's the functional equivalent of gambling."