

Governor Holding The Aces In Florida Casino Campaign

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Lobbyists in Florida are gearing up for another push to legalize up to three resort casinos in a campaign which may hinge on whether Republican Governor Rick Scott publicly endorses their bill.

Another powerful leader, Republican Senate President Mike Haridopolos, already has suggested he is open to legislation that would bring destination resort casinos to the Sunshine state.

Stakeholders in the gambling debate are scheduled to meet September 22 with Republican State Representative Doug Holder of Sarasota, who is the new chairman of the House Subcommittee on Economic Development and Tourism.

"Pari- mutuels and tribes will be there, too, so the chairman can get the lay of the land," said Nick Iarossi, a Tallahassee lobbyist for Las Vegas Sands Corp., Boyd Gaming, Wynn Resorts and other casinos.

Malaysia's Genting, having unveiled its ambitions to turn the headquarters of the Miami Herald into a casino resort, also has hired prominent Florida lobbyists to push hard for a gambling expansion bill next year.

Committee hearings on the Florida Lottery and Internet gaming cafes are scheduled to begin next week.

After coming up empty in the last legislative session which ended in May, the casino industry is hoping the hearings this fall improve chances for a comprehensive gambling expansion bill in the two- month 2012 Florida legislative session beginning January 10.

Casino legislation failed to ignite earlier this year.

An ambitious bill calling for [five destination resort casinos](#) in Florida died in April on a 3-3 vote by the Senate Budget Subcommittee on Finance and Tax.

The new casino bill will be narrower, proposing no more than three casinos and possibly only one, according to Iarossi.

The only sites certain to be included are the densely populated region of Broward County, which includes Fort Lauderdale, and Dade County, which includes Miami.

"We hope to have a bill introduced by early October and a committee hearing by late October or early November," Iarossi said.

The most important person in deciding the outcome of a gambling expansion bill will be Governor Scott, according to Republican State Senator Dennis Jones of Seminole.

"If there is no movement out of the governor's office, and so far I haven't seen any, there is no way a bill can pass," said Jones, the chairman of the Senate Committee on Regulated Industries that has jurisdiction over gaming issues.

[Jones supports destination resort casinos](#), saying they could produce 5,000 to 7,000 new jobs each for Florida's struggling economy.

"That's like bringing another SeaWorld to Florida," Jones said, referring to the famed zoological park in Orlando.

"Right now, we are not a player in the destination resort business, and we need to be," he said.

Casino industry representatives hope to meet with the governor during the next two weeks, but so far, Scott has remained mum on gambling expansion and his press office did not return a request for comment.

A statewide gambling commission to regulate casinos and other gaming operations is likely to be included in the bill introduced this fall, according to pari- mutuel lobbyist Marc Dunbar of Tallahassee.

"The governor [started to weigh in on this](#) at the end of the last session, and I think between now and January, we are likely to see an executive branch policy on gambling," Dunbar said.

Since the conservative Scott is reluctant to expand government, a Florida gambling regulatory commission may be formed by realigning existing state departments instead of creating a new agency.

"I think a master framework for the gambling commission needs to be in place before January," Dunbar said. "We need momentum going into the session."

Dunbar noted the 2012 legislative session will begin earlier than usual to deal with the reapportionment of new legislative districts.

"It's also going to be an election year. Throw in a \$70bn budget that must be passed in 60 days and almost all the oxygen is sucked out of the session," he said.

The gambling expansion bill also is expected to address Internet gaming cafes which continue to multiply in Florida and [across the nation](#).

A bill to ban Internet cafes already has been introduced in the Florida House by Republican Representative Scott Plakon of Longwood.

Similar legislation by Plakon passed the Florida House Business and Consumer Affairs Subcommittee [by a 10-5 vote in March](#) but did not advance to the House floor.

"I think there is a lot more awareness about Internet cafes than there was in the last session because media within the state and nationally have done more stories about the problems they're causing," Plakon told GamblingCompliance.

Usually located in strip malls, Internet cafes offer computer access for a fee. But law enforcement officials often refer to the venues as "storefront casinos" because customers invariably use the computer access to gamble.

Plakon cited the support of Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi as another reason he is hopeful his bill will pass the legislature in the upcoming session.

"My concern is that someone will introduce a bill to regulate Internet cafes as a way to defeat my bill to prohibit them," Plakon said.