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Opposition decides not to ante up at casino hearing in Abington

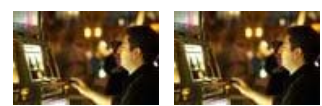
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Photos



AMELIA KUNHARDT

A gambler tries his luck with quarters on a slot machine at Mohegan Sun in this file photo. If the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe opens a casino in Massachusetts, video slots will be featured at its gaming facility.



By Erik Potter
Enterprise staff writer

Posted Sep 14, 2011 @ 06:00 AM

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Opposition decides



ABINGTON — Only five people turned out for a Quincy state senator's town meeting Tuesday on a casino gambling bill making its way through Beacon Hill.

Sen. John Keenan, D-Quincy, laid out the broad strokes of the plan that the House of Representatives will start debating today that calls for three resort-style casinos in three regions of the state (west, northeast and southeast) and one competitively bid slot parlor.

Feedback from the forum at the Abington Council on Aging came mostly from union leaders who emphasized that they wanted to see the construction jobs go to Massachusetts residents.

"I know it's competitively bid, but for God's sake, it's our money, our tax dollars — hire Massachusetts people," said Mark Flaherty, 54, of Rockland, a member of the Plymouth-Bristol Central Labor Council.

State Rep. Geoff Diehl, R-Whitman, who was also there, said that in southeastern Massachusetts, where a casino license would likely be available to an Indian tribe, probably the Mashpee Wampanoags, tribe Chairman Cedric Cromwell was aware that it was "important" to keep jobs local.

The bill crafted behind closed doors this summer by Gov. Deval Patrick, House Speaker Robert DeLeo, D-Winthrop, and Senate President Therese Murray, D-Plymouth, has come under intense criticism in recent weeks, but all from sources outside the Legislature, which is expected to approve the plan to allow three Las Vegas-style casinos and one slots parlor.

The details of the legislation are likely to change over the next two days as House members debate the proposal and vote on more than 150 amendments. However, Keenan said he expects the core of the plan to remain intact.

While broadly in favor of the proposal, Keenan said he had concerns about plans to use 9 percent of revenue from the slot parlor to support horse racing. Four percent of that is earmarked for pension and health care funds for horse owners and trainers.

Another criticism was a lack of checks on Massachusetts Gaming Commission that the legislation establishes that would regulate the gambling industry.

"They have a lot of authority, a lot of power. There's a concern about that," he said, adding that there is no citizen advisory council or equivalent body to

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watch over the commission.

David Klein, 49, of Abington, said he was happy the state is moving forward on a casino bill, but also wants to see skepticism from lawmakers and a willingness to learn from other states' mistakes.

"I grew up in Pennsylvania and was a teenager when the casinos came to Atlantic City," he said. "They promised a lot that was never delivered."

Earlier on Tuesday, former state Attorney General Scott Harshbarger released a list of criticisms of the bill.

Among his concerns, Harshbarger said, are divided oversight of the expanded gambling industry, hefty startup costs associated with a new bureaucracy to regulate the industry, a lack of prohibitions the industry hiring former lawmakers and the proposed creation of "multiple funds and sub-funds to be managed by hundreds of new state employees."

The next meeting will be held tonight at 7 at the Viking lodge in Braintree at 410 Quincy Ave.

Material from GateHouse News Service was used in this story.

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