

Bill seeks oversight of Mass. casino vote spending

Written by Administrator

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BOSTON—Casino developers and their opponents are likely to wage expensive fights to influence voters in potential host communities in the coming months, prompting the state's top elections official to call for stronger oversight of spending for or against local referendums.

A bill proposed by Massachusetts Secretary of State William Galvin would require that all spending on a local casino referendum be reported to a state agency that administers campaign finance law, as is the case with statewide ballot questions. Under current rules, money spent to influence votes on a local issue is reported only to the city or town clerk of that community.

Due to the stakes involved and the likelihood of significant sums being spent for and against casino proposals, Galvin said Monday that more oversight is needed.

"These will be significant votes," he said. "And we have already seen evidence of the controversy they will generate. That makes it all the more important that there be oversight at the state level on the spending that will accompany these votes."

The state's new gambling law authorizes up to three resort style casinos and one slots parlor in Massachusetts. A casino cannot be built, however, without the backing of voters in a host community.

In an interview, Galvin pointed to the fierce debate in Foxborough over a plan by New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft and Las Vegas casino operator Steve Wynn for a resort on land across from Gillette Stadium. While no formal proposal has yet been presented and no referendum scheduled, Boston newspapers have reported that Wynn engaged a marketing firm to deliver a pro-casino message to residents, some of whom have expressed concern that a gambling facility could bring increased crime and traffic and spoil the town's character.

Galvin said the state Office of Campaign and Political Finance, which also tracks campaign contributions and spending in races for statewide office, is better equipped than local clerks to track spending on local referendums and quickly display the source of contributions made to casino proponents and opponents.

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"Voters ought to know about that right away," he said.

Under the bill, filed on behalf of Galvin by state Rep. Angelo Scaccia D-Boston, a committee formed to support or oppose a casino referendum would be required to file its first financial report least 60 days before the vote. Subsequent spending reports would then be due on the 5th and 20th days of each month prior to the election, with a final report due 30 days after the vote.

The bill would not limit spending by either side.

Casino foes fear that deep-pocketed developers, including corporations that already own casinos outside of Massachusetts, will have vastly more resources to spend on local referendum campaigns, compared to the largely grassroots groups that will be opposing them. Galvin, however, predicted that regional competition for casinos might add another dimension to the local fights.

The gambling law allows for only one casino to be built in each of three geographical regions of Massachusetts. Galvin foresees a scenario in which a group pushing for a casino in one community would have incentive to pour money into the effort to defeat a casino proposal in another community located within the same region. If that were the case, voters should have a right to know the source of that money as well, he said.

The legislation is not the first instance in which Galvin has raised concerns about voting on local casino proposals. During last year's debate in the Legislature on the gambling bill, the secretary objected to a provision to limit referendums in the state's three largest cities -- Boston, Worcester and Springfield -- to the city ward where a proposed casino would be built.

The result was a compromise that gives the city councils in Boston, Worcester and Springfield the power to order a city-wide referendum.

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