ALBANY – In the final weeks of the legislative session, when the final provisions of a casino bill were being crafted, lobbyists for the gambling industry could be found everywhere at the Capitol – outside the Assembly speaker's office, grabbing senators near the Senate chamber, and sitting in the war room awaiting meetings with aides to Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo.

The latest expenditure filings by the lobbyists and their gambling industry clients proved what the eye could see: Firms with an interest in plans to expand casino development in New York spent just more than $1 million in May and June, according to a Buffalo News analysis.

By contrast, the Coalition Against Gambling in New York, a statewide group based in Buffalo, spent $600 during the whole session.

"The word 'daunting' is what I would use to describe what we are up against," said Stephen Shafer, the coalition's chairman.

Lobbyists often see business boom in cycles depending on policy debates, and casino gambling has been on the front burner since first passage in 2011 of a constitutional amendment change permitting seven new casinos. The plan will go before voters in a statewide referendum in November.

"It's a safe bet that the access they can buy through these lobbyists will increase the odds that they'll get the results they want," Bill Mahoney of the New York Public Interest Research Group said of the gambling interests.

Shafer never doubted the gambling interests would far outspend his organization.

Still, he sees one opportunity amid all the pro-gambling spending.

“It doesn’t make me feel hopeless,” Shafer said. “If people see what’s going on, it’s possible that they will react to it with distaste and realize there’s an attempt being made to buy this election,” he said of the November referendum. “And, of course, it’s politics as usual.”

The spending by gambling-related interests, at an average clip of $45,000 for every day of the legislative session in May and June, came from near and far. Among the major spenders from Western New York were Delaware North Cos., the owner or operator of two racetrack casinos in the region, along with the Seneca Nation of Indians and the Western Regional Off-Track Betting Corp.

Given the money at stake in Cuomo’s plan to sharply expand casino gambling, national and worldwide interests descended on Albany. Lobbyists represented companies with headquarters from Manhattan to Las Vegas and California, as well as from international addresses in Canada, the suburbs of London, the Isle of Man and Malaysia.

In all, three dozen firms or trade groups with gambling interests had hundreds of lobbyists retained as the final casino talks were under way. Many hired multiple lobbying firms as part of a 20-year trend in Albany in which companies turn to different lobbying firms because they are perceived as having special ties to the governor’s office or to the power bases in the Senate and Assembly.

The $1,033,000 spent on lobbying is in addition to the dollars that poured into campaign accounts of politicians who would decide the casino debate, including Cuomo, lawmakers and central party committees.

A Buffalo News review of campaign donations since January shows individuals, companies, trade groups and Indian tribes with an interest in the casino talks contributed nearly $500,000 to various political causes in New York – in a year with no statewide or legislative races. The sum does not include the hundreds of thousands of dollars from business and union groups with possible interests in the casino debate or by lobbyists whose client base runs beyond just gambling entities.

In May, NYPIRG reported nearly $2 million in campaign donations flowed between December 2010 and January 2013 to New York decision-makers from entities it identified as having a

“strong” interest in gambling policies. That does not include $2 million the New York Gaming Association’s members gave to the Committee to Save New York, a private venture that spent heavily promoting Cuomo and his policies during his first two years in office.

NYPIRG’s Mahoney noted that in the final week of session lawmakers stripped out a provision – sought by Cuomo – to ban campaign donations to New York politicians from developers seeking a casino contract.

Some have had well-connected lobbyists working the halls for years, while others retained lobbyists, many known for their connections to specific GOP and Democratic politicians in Albany, as late as May.

On its disclosure form with the state Joint Commission on Public Ethics, Las Vegas-based MGM Resorts International had two lobbying firms representing its interests at a total cost of $60,000 during May and June. On a disclosure form, the mega-casino stated its reason for lobbying at the Capitol: “business opportunities.”

MGM is one of several major Nevada companies that paid lobbyists anywhere from $10,000 to $60,000 for the two months. Others included Caesar’s Entertainment, Wynn Resorts and the Las Vegas Sands.

Three Indian tribes that cut deals with Cuomo to protect their existing casino interests spent big dollars, too. Besides the Oneida and St. Regis Mohawk tribes, the Seneca Nation of Indians spent $59,000 during May and June on lobbying, including $20,000 to a firm with former Buffalo Mayor Anthony Masiello as a partner.

The No. 1 spender on lobbying during May and June was Genting New York, owned by a Malaysian-based casino operator. The firm runs the lucrative casino at Aqueduct Racetrack in Queens. It spent $211,000 on six firms. In the end, it did not get its wish to have the state permit it to offer real slots and table games at Aqueduct. However, it will benefit from a clause inserted into the bill banning new casino competitors from locating in New York City for at least seven years.

Genting also gave $56,000 to the New York Gaming Association, a group of track-based casino operators with facilities in Hamburg and Batavia, to spread around in campaign donations to Albany politicians.

Besides the nearly $60,000 it spent on lobbying in May and June, the Gaming Association donated $172,000 in the first six months of the year, including $17,500 to the Democratic Assembly Campaign Committee. Like most big donors, its money flowed on a sliding scale depending on the level of the recipients' influence in Albany. It gave $2,500 to Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and $1,500 to Sen. Mark Grisanti, a Buffalo Republican whose GOP partially controls the Senate. The association gave $500 to Sen. Tim Kennedy, a Buffalo Democrat whose party is in the minority, and $250 to Assemblyman Ray Walter, an East Amherst Republican whose party is in the minority in the Assembly.

James Featherstonhaugh – president of the Gaming Association and also a lobbyist in Albany and part owner of a harness track and casino in Saratoga Springs – said all the lobbying he and others did proved worthwhile for the changes made to the final casino bill.

Though the tracks did not win exclusive rights to become full-blown casinos with real slots and table games like poker, they gained considerable financial considerations in the future should a casino locate near them.

Western Regional Off-Track Betting Corp., which is owned by local counties and the cities of Buffalo and Rochester, spent $21,000 during May and June with three lobbying firms. Nassau Off-Track Betting Corp., and Suffolk Off-Track Betting Corp., which got a provision inserted at the last minute into the casino bill allowing them to each open betting halls with up to 1,000 slotlike devices, spent $40,000 combined on lobbying in May and June.

Nassau's lobbying team featured a firm whose partners include former U.S. Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, who worked with a number of gambling firms during the session, and former Erie County Executive Joel Giambra.

Other big lobbying expenditures during May and June came from Yonkers Raceway and casino ($60,000); Rational Services Ltd. ($50,000), the Isle of Man firm that wanted to promote online wagering; and Buffalo's Delaware North ($20,000), which owns a racetrack and casino near

Rochester and manages the casino at the Hamburg harness track.

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