Concord — Lawmakers who eight months ago rejected a casino in New Hampshire by 35 votes are poised to have the debate again this year. But for the first time, one of the four bills that would expand gambling comes with the rigorous regulations detractors have complained were missing.

Rep. Richard Ames, a Jaffrey Democrat who led the bipartisan Gaming Regulatory Oversight Authority that produced that bill, hopes the additional information will change the discussion, if not the outcome.

“My hope is that as we have this debate, people will really try to understand and separate truth from falsehood,” said Ames, who didn’t consider himself a proponent of gambling until this bill came together. He is its prime sponsor. “There will still be people who don’t like casinos or gambling. That is a very reasonable position. But let’s have an honest discussion.”

The Legislature came closest to expanding gambling last year when a bill legalizing a single casino won Democratic Gov. Maggie Hassan’s support, passed in the state Senate and lost by a relatively close margin the House.

Casino supporters have been buoyed especially by Hassan’s support because her predecessor, John Lynch, opposed casinos during his eight years in office.

They’ve also become more insistent as Massachusetts has inched closer to legalizing casino gambling.

Massachusetts officials expect to award licenses by May, and one of the three locations is near Boston. Two casino giants, Mohegan Sun and Wynn Resorts, are vying for that license, each with a proposed $1.3 billion project.

In New Hampshire this year, lawmakers will consider at least four bills seeking to expand gambling.

The Gaming Regulatory Oversight Authority's proposal would offer a single license through competitive bid and tax table game and slot winnings by 18 percent and 35 percent, respectively.

This bill differs from previous bills in four significant ways: It leaves the allocation of casino proceeds to the Legislature; it requires a casino to provide space and money for treating problem gambling; it includes detailed regulations informed by four months of study and expert advice; and it does not allocate space inside the casino for charitable gaming.

Hassan supports the authority's bill, according to her spokesman, Marc Goldberg.

Charitable gaming, which is done at gaming parlors across the state, earned about 500 charities $13.6 million in 2012.

The authority would continue those games but has proposed a separate bill that would significantly overhaul the regulation of charitable gaming.

Other Bills

Sen. Lou D'Allesandro, a Manchester Democrat who has pushed for a casino for more than a decade, is preparing a bill that would license two casinos, one twice as large as the other.

They'd have to be at least 30 miles apart and would have to include space for charitable gaming, D'Allesandro said.

His bill, which has not been made public yet, would tax table game and slot proceeds at 14 and 31 percent respectively and use the money for the state's 10-year highway plan; higher education; North Country economic development; and treating gambling, alcohol and drug addictions.

The host communities and their abutters would also see some of the proceeds.

Rep. Steve Vaillancourt, a Manchester Republican, is back with his bill legalizing slot machines in up to six places across the state; four locales would have 600 machines and two would have 1,300.

The machines would be leased and managed by the state, and the locations would not include charitable gaming.

The state would collect 73 percent of the net machine income and put most of it in the general fund. Counties would also get a small take.

Rep. Dan Sullivan, a Manchester Democrat, and Rep. Frank Sapareto, a Derry Republican, are co-sponsoring the fourth bill, which would allow slot machines in at least six locations, each with no more than 250 machines.

Unlike in Vaillancourt's bill, these machines would be privately owned and managed. Sullivan and Sapareto also require space for charitable gaming at each location. Their bill would tax slot proceeds at 55 percent and would put the money in the general fund.

Host communities would receive a small portion.

Rep. Pat Long, a Manchester Democrat, submitted a fifth bill calling for a single casino license but said last week that he intended to withdraw it. He said he would instead support the other casino bills submitted by the authority and D'Allesandro.

Long said he hoped the new regulations and the 35 percent tax rate on slot revenue in the authority's bill would persuade some of last year's opponents to change positions.

“I believe the House can pass it,” he said. “I think it will be close, but I believe the House can pass it.”

Strong Advocate

Hassan has been a strong advocate for a single casino license awarded through a competitive bid. Goldberg said in an email last week that Hassan remains concerned about losing gambling dollars to Massachusetts.

“As our state stands to lose an estimated $75 million per year to Massachusetts casinos, the governor continues to believe that developing New Hampshire’s own plan for a casino is the right path forward in order to create jobs, boost our economy and generate revenue to invest in critical priorities,” Goldberg wrote. “The Gaming Regulatory Oversight Authority developed thoughtful, bipartisan recommendations for how to best move forward with and regulate one destination casino in New Hampshire as well as the hundreds of millions of dollars in (charitable) gambling already taking place in New Hampshire.”

Goldberg said Hassan “encourages all legislators, especially those who previously expressed concerns about regulatory oversight, to fully consider the authority’s carefully developed recommendations.”

Senate President Chuck Morse, a Salem Republican who co-sponsored a last year’s casino bill with D’Allesandro, said in an email that he remains “confident” the governor and House can agree on a proposal that will also clear the Senate. “Last session, the Senate demonstrated its willingness to pass a well-written expanded gaming bill in order to create jobs and provide a new, nontax revenue source to meet some of our state’s pressing needs,” he said. “I look forward to reviewing the report of the Gaming Regulatory Oversight Authority as well as any legislative proposals that stem from that document.”

Millennium Gaming, based in Las Vegas, has been the most public about its interest in developing a resort-style casino at Rockingham Park in Salem. Voters in Salem have overwhelmingly supported the idea.

Rich Killion, spokesman for Millennium Gaming, said in an email last week that his clients support the Legislature's right to choose between the casino bills. He said Millennium Gaming remains committed to Rockingham Park and hopes the Gaming Regulatory Oversight Authority's work helps inform the debate.

"It is our opinion that the work of the authority has provided New Hampshire perhaps the most informed basis ever in this country to move ahead with expanded gaming," Killion wrote. "The authority worked carefully, deliberately and thoughtfully to craft a report that dealt definitively with the concerns historically raised by the Legislature in its consideration of this issue."

Opposition Prepares

There are already a few groups preparing to oppose all or most of those bills.

Last month, two anti-casino groups, Casino Free New Hampshire and the Granite State Coalition Against Expanded Gambling, held a news conference to kick off their renewed effort to oppose casino legislation.

The groups are led by former state senator Harold Janeway, a Webster Democrat, and Concord developer Steve Duprey, a Republican and former state party chairman.

And six of the eight full-time gaming parlors that host charitable gambling are collaborating to fight any threat to their business.

Rick Newman, who represents the River Card Room in Milford, said he and the others will fight the authority's bill because it doesn't include space for charity games, and its efforts to enhance regulations on charitable gaming.

Newman said the owners of gaming parlors are particularly upset that the authority's bill would require owners of those parlors to spend up to $50,000 for a background check before getting a

license.

That kind of expense would put them out of business, Newman said.

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