

Casino expansion plan delayed but not dead, sponsor says

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BY JON SEIDEL Staff Reporter

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Illinois State Rep. Bob Rita, D-Blue Island, presides over a hearing on gaming legislation Wednesday, April 16, 2014, in Chicago. The proposals for a state-owned Chicago casino won praise Wednesday from business groups and a warmer reception from a state regulatory board than past attempts to expand gambling, but the plans also drew criticism from downstate officials and the horse racing industry who said it would cheat them out of needed revenues and jobs. Two proposals, are on the table: One adds five casinos, including in Chicago, plus slots at racetracks. The other calls for a mega-casino in Chicago. In both plans, the Chicago casino would be state run, which Rita said was in response to past criticism. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green) ORG XMIT: ILMG101

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The south suburban lawmaker pushing a gambling expansion package in Springfield said Friday “it’s delayed, it’s not dead” after he announced he won’t call his bill for a vote before the end of the spring legislative session.

“We don’t have a bill that’s ready,” Rep. Bob Rita, D-Blue Island, told the Chicago Sun-Times.

Not only are Downstate conflicts over slot machines at Fairmount Park Race Track unresolved, Rita said support from Gov. Pat Quinn and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel are key to passing a casino bill.

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Rita has said neither man is engaged in the casino debate — Emanuel has insisted on tackling pension reform first — but Rita said he'll be reaching out to both over the summer with hopes of passing a bill during the fall veto session.

“Chicago is going to be part of the mix if we're going to move forward,” Rita said.

Rita sent a letter to legislative leaders last week, hoping to give the bill new life after what he described as an “underwhelming” response to two alternative proposals he pitched in March.

The first would authorize a state-owned Chicago casino with 4,000 to 10,000 gaming positions. By comparison, existing Illinois casinos are limited to 1,200. Under that plan, Chicago would split the casino's revenue equally with Illinois, though Cook County and south suburban communities would get a cut of Chicago's half.

The other alternative would give Chicago a casino with 4,000 to 6,000 gaming positions and allow casinos in the south suburbs and Lake, Winnebago and Vermilion counties. It would also allow slot machines at some horse racing tracks, but not Fairmount Park out of concern for competition with nearby casinos.

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