

Revenue loss to fuel push for Ind. casino help

Written by Administrator
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Mike Rogers looked through his hand after being dealt cards by dealer Valerie South during a game of Pai Gow Poker at the Horseshoe Southern Indiana casino Friday morning. (By Matt Stone, The Courier-Journal) July 10, 2009(Photo: MATT STONE)

INDIANAPOLIS – Indiana has lost more than \$110 million in casino gambling revenue amid increased competition from neighboring states, and riverboat owners say they need to find ways to make the sites more competitive.

They could find help in Republican Rep. Tom Dermody of LaPorte, who was named chairman of the House Public Policy Committee in 2013. Dermody said he's been visiting casinos around the state to assess the situation and appears to take a looser view of changes than conservative lawmakers and Gov. Mike Pence, who've long balked at an expansion of gambling.

"I think he'll be more receptive to ideas that are more favorable to the industry," said John Keeler, vice president and general counsel for Centaur Gaming, which owns both of Central Indiana's racetrack casinos.

Dermody isn't committing to anything and says any decision by lawmakers needs to make sense for the entire state. But he says he hopes to overcome the in-state turf battles that have bogged down discussions of gambling changes in the past.

He notes that the casinos employ hundreds of people and that French Lick Resort, which

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includes a casino, is the major employer for eight or nine surrounding counties.

"Those are real jobs we can't ignore," he told the Indianapolis Business Journal.

August marked the 24th straight month with a year-over-year decline in statewide winnings, according to the Indiana Gaming Commission. The total win, which is the casinos' gambling revenue after payouts, was \$199.5 million, down 4.7 percent from August 2013.

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At Penn National Gaming's Hollywood Casino in Lawrenceburg, total win dropped from \$29.7 million in February 2013 to \$28.8 million that March, when Caesars Entertainment's Horseshoe Casino opened in Cincinnati.

Hollywood's total win had fallen to \$17.8 million by last month, according to the gaming commission.

Even Hoosier Park in Anderson and Indiana Grand in Shelbyville, the state's two racetrack casinos, are seeing declines despite being buffered from out-of-state competition.

The August win at Hoosier Park in Anderson was \$18.6 million, down slightly from a year ago. Indiana Grand in Shelbyville brought in \$20.8 million, down from \$21.8 million a year ago.

The racinos only have slot machines. Keeler said Centaur will ask lawmakers once again in 2015 to allow them to add live table games.

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Keeler said the racinos are feeling some effects from the proliferation of video lottery terminals in Illinois. The Columbus, Ohio, area also has several racetracks with video lottery.

"The economy, for a lot of our customers, hasn't come roaring back," Keeler added.

Whether Indiana lawmakers are sympathetic next year remains to be seen. They did not seriously consider allowing live table games at the racinos or allowing riverboat casinos to build on land in 2013.

A late-session compromise allowed casinos to deduct free-play coupons from taxable revenue and created a tax break for the smallest riverboats.

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