

Non-smoking Cedar Rapids casino bill advances in Senate

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(Photo: Picasa)

A bill aimed at forcing state regulators to grant a state gambling license to establish a non-smoking casino in Cedar Rapids advanced in an Iowa Senate subcommittee Thursday, although it faces an uncertain future.

The three-member subcommittee, chaired by Sen. Wally Horn, D-Cedar Rapids, voted 2-1 to send Senate File 139 to the Iowa Senate State Government Committee. A similar bill that would authorize two no-smoking casinos was considered by an Iowa House panel earlier this week, but did not advance.

Horn unsuccessfully proposed a Cedar Rapids gambling bill at the end of last year's legislative session. That happened after the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission voted 4-1 to reject plans for a \$164 million casino in Cedar Rapids, saying it would hurt existing casinos.

The Senate bill doesn't specifically name Cedar Rapids as the site of new smoke-free casino, but it would require the gambling business to be located in a city with a population of more than 50,000.

All of Iowa's existing 21 casinos permit patrons to smoke on the gambling floor.

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Gary Grant, a lobbyist for the City of Cedar Rapids, said city officials understand the push for a Cedar Rapids casinos is an “incredibly uphill climb,” but he believes it’s appropriate for lawmakers to review the state’s oversight of the casino industry.

Larry Murphy, a former legislator who also lobbies for the City of Cedar Rapids, said that under current state policy, casino workers are forced to work in an environment where they are breathing second-hand smoke on a daily basis.

Frank Chiodo, a lobbyist for Riverside Casino, which is south of Iowa City, warned that a Cedar Rapids casino would be “economically devastating” to Riverside’s business. He suggested the legislation would amount to an end-run around state gambling regulators.

Horn urged support for the bill, saying Cedar Rapids still needs economic development in the aftermath of the tragic floods of 2008 that devastated the eastern Iowa community. He was backed by Sen. Dick Dearden, D-Des Moines, who said he felt Cedar Rapids was shortchanged by the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission. He also suggested that opening a smoke-free casino would allow state officials to see first-hand whether prohibiting smoking in a gambling operation actually hurts profits.

Sen. Rick Bertrand, R-Sioux City, opposed the bill. He said he favors a moratorium on the issuance of new casino licenses in Iowa and he supports the current regulatory process.

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