

House panel hears casino gambling bill

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Bill Cotterell 5:55 p.m. EDT March 26, 2015



House Majority Leader Dana Young, R-Tampa, talks with reporters at the Capitol on Thursday after a four-hour hearing on her casino gambling bill by the House Regulatory Affairs Committee. (Photo: Bill Cotterell/Democrat)

House Majority Leader Dana Young said she wanted to get a discussion going on gambling Thursday, so a committee heard about everything from glamorous mega-casinos to dying greyhounds in a four-hour hearing.

Whether legislators will make any major changes to Florida's "gaming" laws looks like a long shot. The House Regulatory Affairs Committee workshop ended with no plan for a vote on Young's 316-page bill, which seemingly faces even tougher odds in the Senate.

"This is a gaming bill and gaming bills never come up until the last couple days of session," the Tampa Republican told reporters as she left the hearing.

Las Vegas-style casinos have become an annual standoff between business interests, with the Seminole Tribe and some religious groups kibitzing as lawmakers debate potential billion-dollar revenue sources and the state's image. Proponents argue that Florida has had lots of gambling for about 75 years – everything from the state-run lottery to thoroughbred racing – while opponents contend that's precisely why Florida doesn't need any more.

"Turning Florida into a casino destination makes about as much sense as a bank getting into the sub-prime mortgage business," John Sowinski, leader of the No Casinos organization, told

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the committee. He said “casinos have closed or are teetering” on the brink of bankruptcy from Atlantic City to Mississippi.

But Nick Iarossi, a lobbyist for Las Vegas Sands Corp., said multi-national gambling operations see the state as a growth area. With seven Seminole casinos operating under a compact set to expire in July, as well as slot machines and card rooms at some pari-mutuel establishments, Iarossi said big casinos would draw a younger, affluent crowd to Florida.

He scoffed at reports of rising crime rates or compulsive gambling addiction getting worse, wherever casinos spread.

“Look at the facts, not the scare tactics, not the anecdotal information,” said Iarossi. “The things that are being alleged just haven’t taken place in those areas.”

Brewster Bevis of Associated Industries of Florida agreed with the casino lobbyist.

“These will be an economic engine for southeast Florida, one that will bring new visitors from outside the state to Florida to spend their money here,” he said.

But Marc Wilson, president of the Florida Chamber of Commerce, said the multi-national casino companies need Florida – Florida doesn’t need them. Wilson said tourist attractions have spent decades building a reputation for family entertainment in Florida, adding that casinos would not boost the state’s economy.

“Now is exactly not the time to throw all that out and go the way of Nevada, go the way of Atlantic City,” he said. “Florida does not need the Las Vegas-style casinos.”

Young’s bill (HB 1233) would allow two “destination resort” casino complexes in Broward and Miami-Dade Counties, each requiring a \$2 billion investment – not counting land costs. They would produce a minimum \$175 million a year in revenue for the state, more than exceeding the

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existing tribal compact.

There would also be a constitutional amendment forbidding any further gambling expansion after the two mega casinos. The state would not issue any new permits in the meantime.

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