

Pence to let bills on casino moves, nursing homes become law

Written by Administrator
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Casino Aztar is shown at dockside on the Ohio River in Evansville, Ind. Gov. Mike Pence on Friday let become law legislation to allow the 10 riverboats along Lake Michigan and the Ohio River the option to build new on-land casinos on property near their current locations. (Photo: Karen Ducey / The Star 2002 file photo)

Indiana's riverboat casinos will be allowed to build new on-land facilities and a three-year moratorium will be imposed on construction of most new nursing homes around the state, under bills that Gov. Mike Pence said Friday he'll let become law without his signature.

Pence, who is leaving Saturday for a weeklong trip to China, faced a Monday deadline to act on the proposals approved during the General Assembly session that concluded last week.

The governor also issued his first vetoes of the year Friday in rejecting bills that would allow electronic wagering on horse races and permit state and local government entities to charge fees for fulfilling some public records requests.

Pence's decision on the casino legislation was in question because of his often-stated stance against an expansion of gambling in the state, while not detailing publicly what he regarded as an expansion.

Earlier versions of the legislation would have allowed the horse track casinos in Anderson and Shelbyville to add live dealers for table games such as blackjack, but that provision was dropped after legislative leaders said Pence objected. The new law will allow those casinos to

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seek permission for live dealers in 2021.

Indiana's casinos have seen big declines in business and the loss of hundreds of jobs in recent years as more gambling options have become available in Ohio, Michigan and Illinois.

The new law gives the 10 riverboats along Lake Michigan and the Ohio River the option to build new on-land casinos on property near their current locations. Owners of the Evansville and Gary casinos have especially pushed for that change, saying they could build better facilities that could attract more customers.

Pence said Friday he believed the measure met his standard and he wouldn't issue a veto.

"From early in the legislative process, I made it clear that I would not stand in the way of reforms that would allow these businesses to remain competitive with surrounding states so long as it did not constitute an expansion of gaming in Indiana," Pence said in a statement.

One of the bills vetoed by Pence would permit Indiana residents to place bets from wagering accounts with a pari-mutuel organization. Horse race wagers can now only legally be placed at the Anderson and Shelbyville horse tracks and the four off-track betting parlors around the state.

Pence said he believed the measure represented an expansion of gambling in the state.

The bill passed the House and Senate by wide margins, and lawmakers could override Pence's veto with a simple majority. Legislators could consider an override as soon as a possible one-day technical corrections session on June 8.

Nursing home construction

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Meanwhile, the moratorium on construction of most new nursing homes around Indiana will become law a year after the failure of a similar bill sparked a legislative ethics investigation of a top Republican lawmaker.

Pence said he would let the bill become law without his signature despite his concerns about restricting free-market principles.

"I hesitate to support any restriction on commerce, but in an industry that derives 85 percent of its revenue from state and federal sources, we must always consider the impact of our policies on the cost to taxpayers," he said.

Supporters say the moratorium is needed because Indiana has thousands of unused nursing home beds, which are costing the state millions in annual Medicaid costs based on a payment formula that includes construction costs.

A similar proposal failed in 2014 after private lobbying by then-House Speaker Pro Tem Eric Turner, whose family business faced losing millions of dollars.

The House Ethics Committee determined that Turner didn't technically violate House ethics rules barring lawmakers from using the office for their own self-interest. Turner, a Republican from Cicero, resigned from the Legislature in November.

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