

## *Saratoga Springs*

Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#) 's former top gaming adviser said the process that led to legislative approval of casino expansion showed an executive who was more like a rope-a-doping [Muhammad Ali](#) than an autocratic Big Brother.

[Bennett Liebman](#) , who retired last year after serving as Cuomo's deputy secretary for gaming and racing, on Wednesday offered a revealing and often witty insider's history of the 2013 negotiation of the state's casino blueprint. The talk kicked off the second day of the [Saratoga Institute](#) on Equine, Racing & Gaming Law Conference, organized by Albany Law School's Government Law Center.

The formulation of the casino blueprint played out as the Legislature considered going ahead with the key second passage of a proposed constitutional amendment that would have allowed for the establishment of up to seven casinos around the state.

Liebman said Cuomo had three goals: the establishment of a deliberative casino siting process with no predetermined winners; getting the plan through the Legislature; and an "eyes on the prize" strategy that "minimizes moneyed opposition to a casino" who might work to defeat the constitutional change in the ensuing statewide referendum.

The state Senate's Republican conference, with its majority of upstate members, wanted casinos for that region as well as new video lottery terminal facilities for Long Island, home to a powerful bloc of conference members including then-Leader [Dean Skelos](#) .

"The Assembly has one principle goal, and that's to keep casinos out of New York City," Liebman said in his present-tense narrative.

## Aide: Cuomo no casino autocrat

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He said that while the Senate depended almost entirely on two staff members, [Beth Garvey](#) and [Kevin Bronner](#) (now with the state [Business Council](#)), the Assembly brought "very nice people," although they came from several legislative committees and had "no coordination whatsoever."

"The Assembly staff is not empowered to finalize any issues," he said, likening it to an inversion of the salesman's mantra from the play "Glengarry Glen Ross": Instead of "Always Be Closing," the Assembly staff seemed to follow the rule "Always Be Kibbitzing."

Liebman said no one in leadership expected interest in casino proposals for Orange County in the Catskills or the Southern Tier. In the end, a half-dozen applicants pitched casinos in Orange County, though the state [Gaming Commission](#)'s siting panel picked the Montreign project in Sullivan County as the sole Catskills winner.

The talks climaxed just days before the end of session, when the staff stakeholders gathered with exhausted bill drafters to proof the final legislative language.

"This, amazingly, reopens the bill to negotiation," Liebman said. One significant late change: The Legislature demanded the deletion of a provision that would have banned political donations from casino applicants and licensees.

In the end, Liebman said, the blueprint passed both houses "because the executive conceded on a host of positions," ranging from workforce issues to casino crimes.

"While the governor does not get what he wants, he gets what he needs," Liebman said. "He achieves what I would call a 'reverse Goldilocks': ... Nobody's happy, but nobody's unhappy enough to put up money to complain about it."

"In the current novelized version of Albany, Andrew Cuomo often appears as the supreme one.

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... He's not the New York version of American Pharoah, he is the pharaoh from the 'Ten Commandments' movie — so let it be written, so let it be done."

"In my world, that's not the way it was," Liebman said. "As long as the essentials of the casino proposal were achieved, the executive repeatedly gave in to legislative demands."

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