The start of Georgia's legislative session is weeks away, but supporters and opponents of a proposal to allow casinos throughout the state are already battling for lawmakers' attention.

A study committee met three times this fall to hear testimony about the issue. However, its chairman, Rep. Matt Ramsey, on Thursday said the group will sum up what it has learned in a report rather than make an up-or-down recommendation before lawmakers return to the Capitol on Jan. 11.

In the meantime, gambling powerhouses aren't staying quiet. MGM Chairman and CEO Jim Murren teased interest in a downtown resort and casino at the panel's first meeting, adding that metro Atlanta could support a $1 billion project with restaurants and concerts for other entertainment options.

MGM has 14 lobbyists prepared to continue making the company's pitch, a number that rivals other Capitol powerhouses. For instance, state records listed 15 lobbyists registered on behalf of the utility Georgia Power and named eight for the Georgia Chamber of Commerce.

Other gambling firms have hired lobbyists ahead of the session. Records show three registered for the Boyd Gaming Corp., which runs 22 casinos in eight states including Louisiana and Mississippi. Penn National Gaming, with 27 casinos including several Mississippi properties, also has three registered lobbyists.

Opponents of gambling expansion in Georgia, wary of gambling companies' clear preparations for 2016, are trying to reach members at home before the session begins. The conservative Faith and Freedom Coalition this month sent out flyers headlined "Stop the casino rip-off!" to voters in several of the study committee members' districts, warning that crime, corruption and addiction will follow gambling expansion.

Gambling in Georgia is largely limited to a state-run lottery, and previous bids to permit casinos or horse racing have failed. Meanwhile, Georgians are traveling to casinos run by Indian tribes with compacts that limit commercial facilities in other Deep South states, pro-casino lawmakers say.

To the north, the Cherokee tribe in North Carolina opened its second casino this summer, located an hour closer to Atlanta gamblers. Florida and Seminole Tribe officials this week announced a new gambling deal, awaiting legislative approval, which would allow table games at the tribe's existing locations and limit commercial development. The Poarch Band of Creek Indians runs three casinos with electronic bingo machines in Alabama, where lawmakers rejected commercial expansion this year as a fix for the state's budget woes.

Demand for Georgia's merit-based HOPE scholarship program has outpaced lottery funding in recent years, prompting casino supporters to suggest the facilities as a fix. Without casinos in Georgia, potential scholarship money is crossing the border, said Rep. Ron Stephens, a Savannah Republican sponsoring the casino bill.

Stephens' proposal would divide the state into districts. Stephens said last week that he's open to allowing two casinos in metro Atlanta and another four at each corner of the state to ward off competitors in other states.

Lawmakers seized an opportunity to consider gambling in the "Preservation of the HOPE Scholarship Program" study committee meetings, without deeper study of other options, said Virginia Galloway with the Faith and Freedom Coalition.

"I think there's a lot of misinformation that could come out from supporters with large budgets," she said. "Most people don't even know this committee is meeting. They don't know by the name what it's about."

Supporters' odds of winning gambling expansion this year remain unclear. Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal has told reporters he's concerned the state lottery will lose revenue and has suggested a higher tax rate is necessary for him to reconsider.

Stephens' existing bill would tax 12 percent of gross gambling revenue, with at least 90 percent of the total going toward educational programs including HOPE scholarships. Stephens said this week he's open to that conversation.

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