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OCEANPORT  — Democratic legislators and gambling industry representatives yesterday considered the odds that off-track wagering, sports betting and intrastate internet gambling could help save the state's casino and horse racing industries.

Meeting in a packed

club room at Monmouth Park racetrack in Oceanport for the last in a series of legislative hearings, legislators and members of the gaming and horse racing industries talked about the urgent need to increase revenue and save casinos and racetracks from competition in other states.

"Over the past eight weeks, we've heard countless ideas and concerns from the people whose livelihoods rely on a strong and stable gaming industry, whether they work in Atlantic City's casinos or at one of the horse tracks,'' said Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester). "We can't afford to let even one job hang and twist in the wind. We have momentum coming from this summit that we cannot lose.''

The Senate today is set to vote on legislation starting a pilot program that would allow casino hotels with at least 200 rooms to be built in Atlantic City. The current threshold is 500, which some developers say prevents the city from attracting investors.

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The three gaming summits, chaired by Sen. Jim Whelan (D-Atlantic) and Assemblyman John Burzichelli (D-Gloucester), were convened two months ago after a report recommended, among other things, freeing up $30 million in annual casino subsidies to the horse racing industry. That money would be reinvested in Atlantic City's casino industry by ending live racing at the Meadowlands and Monmouth Park.

## ALL ABOUT SUBSIDIES

Report author Jon Hanson, chairman of the New Jersey Gaming, Sports and Entertainment Advisory Commission, yesterday said the panel isn't looking to end live horse racing but wants New Jersey taxpayers to stop subsidizing it.

"We're supportive of horse racing,'' Hanson said. "We should find a way to keep it operating.''

Dennis Drazin, chairman of the New Jersey Racing Commission, said a 2001 study funded by those involved in horse racing concluded the industry would have reaped $45 million a year if off-track wagering facilities were built with all 15 licenses issued a decade ago. New Jersey currently has only three off-track wagering facilities, and Drazin proposed letting tracks use some licenses for the wagering facilities.

Drazin also suggested the state continue some form of subsidy — which he said would have to start at $50 million — that would decrease as the industry and the state found ways to make horse racing financially independent.

Whelan warned lawmakers would want assurances that so-called bridge funding "is a bridge to somewhere,'' not a repeat of the subsidies — now in their seventh year — that were only meant for three years.

Sen. Jeff Van Drew (D-Cape May) said legalized sports betting could end organized crime involvement.

"This would make it clean. Let the sun shine on it,'' he said.

But sports betting is prohibited in New Jersey and 45 other states, under a federal ban Sen. Raymond Lesniak's (D-Union) law firm is challenging.

Internet gaming is a more immediate option, Whelan said, because it would not require a constitutional amendment as sports betting would.

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