

# Texas Gaming Association plans push for casinos

The association, which filed as a nonprofit group late last year, says that it is wiser to authorize giant tourist-drawing casinos than to increase taxes. The group envisions nine location-specific casinos, including one in Austin, and three casinos with locations to be determined. Such legislation has languished before in the Republican-majority Legislature, which also has resisted the legalization of video lottery terminals, similar to slot machines, at existing horse and dog tracks.

Last year, a pro-casino group funded largely by Texas real estate developers, Let the Voters Decide, never gained ground. But lobbyist-lawyer Chris Shields, the gaming association's director, said this week that soon-to-be revealed corporations fueling his group will spur momentum – a claim questioned by an anti-gaming lobbyist from the Christian Life Commission.

Shields said: „The resources, wisdom and experience those guys bring means the issue is likely to get some consideration and a fair hearing.“

At the least, the proposal provides a glimpse of how lobby strategy forms. It urges a coalition with dog and horse track owners. He details the possible recruitment of lobbyist and former state Senator David Sibley as well as the hiring of a spokesperson, describing specific individuals who might fill the job.

The proposal says the group should see hearings by the Perry-appointed Texas Tax Reform Commission as a chance to establish its concepts and begin implementing strategy. The commission will be looking for new ways to generate revenue to pay for public education.

The proposal also suggests creating a political arm to contribute money to key legislators, an idea that might not flower, Shields said. His proposal suggests that the group secure the votes of 25 to 32 Texas House Republicans who have served 10 years or fewer and who have previously opposed casinos or been uncommitted.

„Generally speaking, forget about the House Democrats,“ it says. „We can't give them what they want, which is more money for public schools and health care.“ Suzii Paynter, director of public policy for the Christian Life Commission, which opposes gambling proposals, sees nothing new in the plans. As of September, Capitol lobbyists were reporting possible income of us\$ 4 million to more than us\$ 7 million for representing gambling interests in Texas, with out-of-state entities spending up to us\$ 2 million of the total, according to watchdog group Texans for Public Justice.

Chuck McDonald, an Austin consultant who has advised both pro- and anti-gambling advocates, said the pro-casino effort will prove uphill. „While the majority of Texans are not opposed to gambling, the passion on the issue is on the 'no' side,“ he said.

Pratt, whose family has roots in the casino industry, said two-thirds of the association's budget of more than us\$ 1.5 million through the 2007 regular legislative session will come from out-of-state gaming companies; other money will flow from Texas businesses wanting the state join more than 30 others that allow casinos of some type. He said the group also would support a public vote legalizing video lottery terminals at horse and dog tracks. Changes to the state constitution require both legislative approval by two-thirds margins of each body and voter adoption at the polls.

Shields' December proposal suggests a goal of getting a casino proposal on a statewide ballot in August. But Pratt said there isn't time to plug casinos to lawmakers leading into an

expected spring special session on public education. He said proponents will try to build support without expecting legislators who oppose gambling for religious reasons to back down.

Paynter said the pro-gaming association faces difficulty partly because the platform of the Republican Party of Texas opposes casinos and video lottery terminals, even urging repeal of the state lottery. „Obviously their strategy is to try to divide up the Republican members,“ Paynter said.

Perry has never favored legalizing casinos, spokeswoman Kathy Walt said. She characterized his 2004 advocacy of video lottery terminals as a move intended to wipe out illegal slot machines, often called eight-liners.