

Texas lawmakers to consider gaming expansion

Texas has seen dozens of proposals for expanded gaming over the years—none ever gaining enough traction to succeed. While the state's lottery and prize-dispensing VLTs at truck stops have been successful, lawmakers just haven't seen the need to add full-fledged slot machines and „Las Vegas-style“ casinos. And anti-gambling forces are strong and well-funded throughout the state.

But this spring, lawmakers' priority will be overhauling the state's beleaguered school finance system, and finding new funding sources for education. Gaming proponents see that as their window of opportunity.

It's not the first time gaming and education have been linked in the Legislature. In 2004, Governor Rick Perry introduced a school finance plan that would have allowed slot machines to be installed at the state's racetracks and major Indian reservations, with taxes on the machines going to education. In return, the prize-dispensing VLTs would be outlawed. But anti-gambling forces—notably the Eagle Forum and the Baptist General Convention of Texas—waged a successful campaign to defeat the proposal.

The problems, gaming proponents said, remain today. „We are completely surrounded by states that have casinos, horse racing, you name it,“ Bill Stinson, an Austin lobbyist who represents the Fort Worth Stockyards in its efforts to develop a hotel and casino complex on that city's north side told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. „It doesn't make sense to me why we would drive billions of dollars across state lines when we could keep that money right here in Texas.“

Reggie Bashur, a lobbyist with the Texas Horseman's

Partnership, agrees, adding that by allowing video slots at tracks throughout state, more revenue would be created for larger purses and larger, higher-stakes races. State Agricultural Commissioner Susan Combs said the financial benefits of slots at tracks would also positively impact the state's ranching and farming industries.

Another effort, this one seeking legalization of casino resorts in a number of locations throughout Texas, is being spearheaded by Austin lobbyist Chris Shields. His newly formed Texas Gaming Association, backed by the representatives of the state's hotel industry, is advocating casinos as a major boost to the state's tourism industry. „We want high-quality destination resort casinos,“ Shields said.

A core group of conservative Republicans are against gambling, while most of the state's Democrat lawmakers are equally opposed, especially with regard to linking gaming revenues to education.

Dunnam said he, like many lawmakers will continue to keep an open mind on gaming-related issues, and even anti-gambling advocates note that this year, gaming issues will be harder to defeat. „It will come back, there's no doubt about it,“ said Suzii Paynter, a lobbyist for the Baptist General Convention.