

Rhode Island Senate panel OK's measure to allow casino

Providence – Voters are closer to deciding whether Rhode Island should have a casino to compete with those in neighboring Connecticut.

The Senate Constitutional and Gaming Issues Committee approved on a 6 to 3 vote yesterday a constitutional amendment that would pave the way for the Narragansett Indian Tribe to build a casino in West Warwick.

„I think we should trust the people and let them decide,“ Senate President Joseph Montalbano said before casting his vote.

The full Senate is expected to vote on the amendment tomorrow, legislative spokesman Greg Pare said. If the Senate passes the amendment, voters would have their say during the November general election.

The House approved the amendment last week. It would exempt the tribe and its business partners from a constitutional provision requiring state authorities to operate all lotteries, including casinos. The tribe has long been partnered with Las Vegas-based Harrah's Entertainment.

Several business leaders spoke against the amendment at a hearing preceding the committee's vote.

Dale Venturini, president of the Rhode Island Hospitality and Tourism Association, said before the hearing that her members are firmly against a casino. She called Harrah's the „king of comps“ for its ability to give gamblers free drinks, meals, hotel stays, and other rewards.

She said casinos are adept at mopping up consumers'

discretionary income with gambling tables, restaurants, and retail shops, and she doubts few patrons will drive north to try restaurants or entertainment in Providence.

Earlier in the day, other business leaders announced their support for the amendment.

Restaurateur Rick Simone said Rhode Island needs a casino to compete with those in Connecticut.

He said he and other restaurant owners expanded their staffs and created special menus in anticipation of a 2003 Fraternal Order of Police convention in Providence. But when the convention let out, those attending boarded buses to the Connecticut casinos.

„What should have been a huge windfall for Providence and the whole state of Rhode Island turned into a loss,“ said Simone, who serves as a spokesman for CompeteRI, a coalition representing more than 60 businesses.