

Congress may fold casinos' bid

Any hopes Las Vegas casinos had of the federal government gently starting to loosen prohibitions on Internet gambling are likely stalled now that U.S. House Republicans have decided to target online betting as a cornerstone of their election-year American Values Agenda.

The casinos have been watching on the sidelines as the online jackpot has become a lucrative USD 15 billion industry worldwide in just a few short years. Internet gambling is the fastest-growing segment of the industry, with 8 million Americans gambling – illegally – online.

Earlier this year, the American Gaming Association called for a congressional study to determine the feasibility of perhaps regulating online gambling, much as Nevada and other states oversee rules for brick-and-mortar casinos. Nevada Reps. Jon Porter, a Republican, and Shelley Berkley, a Democrat, joined forces this spring to introduce legislation establishing a study commission.

But that objective is essentially doomed now that House Republicans have made anti-gambling legislation part of their conservative agenda of 10 bills _ including bans on gay marriage, flag burning and abortion _ to be addressed in the run-up to the November elections.

As early as next week, legislation that would clamp down on Internet gambling could be headed for a floor vote in the House, where many believe it is likely to pass. Its prospects in the Senate remain less certain.

David Stewart, a Washington attorney who represents the American Gaming Association and companies interested in Internet gambling, said casinos intend to watch the election-

year action unfold, then figure out their next move.

Congress has tried repeatedly to strengthen the prohibitions against online gambling over the next decade, but has yet to pass any new laws on the subject.

„We've been around this track a lot,“ Stewart said.

If Internet gambling legislation is not approved this year, Porter and Berkley would „be in fine shape to go forward“ with their push for a study, Stewart said.

„If this does happen, it might not be very sensible to go after it next year,“ he added.

The casinos' quiet persistence is what motivates traditional values advocate James Dobson's efforts to make sure that 2006 is the year that online betting is banned for good.

Dobson's Colorado-based Focus on the Family group believes it's only a matter of time before the gaming industry pushes for legalization of online gambling. The organization believes that online gambling is even more problematic than casino action because it brings wagering into homes.

„This year is one of our last chances to get this legislation passed. It's going to be more and more difficult in the future just because of the momentum this thing's carrying with it,“ said Chad Hills, a gaming policy analyst at Focus on the Family. „The gambling industry is not going to remain neutral on this because they're starting to see the dollar signs flash.“