

# Bill would let New Jersey casinos police themselves during shutdown

Atlantic City, New Jersey – The city's 11 casinos would be able to temporarily police themselves if state government ever shuts down again under a bill being pushed by a state senator who is a former Atlantic City mayor.

As tempting as that might sound for casinos to cut corners – or worse – while state inspectors are not on the job, the law would enable the governor to shut down a casino for serious wrongdoing.

The governor could also unilaterally suspend the license of a casino, or any casino employee, who he determines has committed „a serious violation“ of state gambling laws.

The suspension would remain in effect until the governor cancels it, or until the government shutdown ends, and the state Casino Control Commission could convene to deal with it.

The 2006 state government shutdown, when the governor and state legislators could not agree on a budget, caused the casinos to shut down for three days because state casino inspectors were not able to be paid, and thus not able to work.

Since then, the industry has tried several ways to prevent a recurrence. One way was by designating casino inspectors as „essential personnel“ on the same level as state police, who would still be able to work during a shutdown. But Gov. Jon Corzine's administration got legal opinions questioning whether that would be legal.

The new bill is sponsored by state Sen. James Whelan, a

Democrat and former Atlantic City mayor.

It also would increase the fines – by tenfold – for casinos or casino workers found to have committed lesser wrongdoing during a shutdown.

In an interview last week with The Associated Press, Corzine said he would sign any anti-shutdown bill that would pass constitutional muster. But he also said the key to keeping casinos open is to pass a budget well before the July 1 deadline, as was done last year.

However, this year's spending plan is far more contentious, with its call for drastic spending and aid cuts to municipalities.

Joe Corbo, president of the Casino Association of New Jersey, said the casinos support any legislation that will prevent another shutdown.

„We are approaching the point when our customers will be making plans for the upcoming Fourth of July holiday and the budget situation will again be challenging,“ he said. „Our customers will remember the shutdown of two years ago. And if the possibility of a closure is not eliminated, they may choose to bypass Atlantic City this year.“

Linda Kassekert, chairwoman of the Casino Control Commission, said the commission wants to work with lawmakers to fashion a workable plan.

„Certainly no one wants a state government shutdown, especially one that forces casinos to close,“ she said.

The casinos estimate they lost about USD 55 million during the 2006 shutdown. The state lost out on USD 3 million in tax revenues and casino workers lost USD 10 million in salaries and tips.

Whelan's bill cleared a Senate committee on Monday, and will

now be considered by the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee.