

Texas' revenue problems spark a renewed push for casinos

With the economy slumping and state revenue getting tighter, gambling proponents are betting that it's the perfect time to bring casino-style gambling to Texas.

They say casinos could bring billions of dollars into the state and add thousands of jobs.

Some of the extra push this session is coming from Galveston, the storm-ravaged island that is struggling to recover from Hurricane Ike. And the continued expansion of tribal casinos just across the border in Oklahoma continues to attract more dollars from North Texas.

„We're optimistic we'll get a fair audience at the Legislature," said Duane Galligher, a lobbyist for the Texas Gaming Alliance. „Gaming is always prevalent, but the fact that the budget looks far worse than it did two years ago has legislators looking for new sources of revenue.“

The Texas Gaming Alliance represents the Las Vegas Sands and Station casinos and is chaired by Dallas businessman and former Hollywood Casinos chief executive Jack Pratt.

Their plan would call for a dozen resort-style casinos as well as allowing slot machines at race tracks and the three recognized Native American tribes in Texas. For Tarrant and Dallas counties, that could mean as many as four casinos, Galligher said.

Texas voters must approve a constitutional amendment.

Competing legislation

Competing bills are also expected; one would bring slot machines to ailing race tracks and another would legalize

poker.

The gaming alliance's proposed legislation, which it says would pump USD 1 billion into transportation and USD 1 billion into college scholarships, is similar to a bill filed during the last session that never came up for a vote. Only one gambling bill, which would have permitted limited gambling for the Tigua and Alabama-Coushatta Indian reservations, made it to the floor last session.

Despite the economic issues, state Rep. Charlie Geren, R-Fort Worth, said it is too early to tell if gaming legislation has a better chance this session.

„I've got no interest in any gambling legislation at all, but I think it's ludicrous to say it has a chance of getting passed when you don't know who is on the committee," said Geren, who has supported casinos in previous sessions.

Rob Kohler, a consultant and lobbyist for the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, said he still believes that gambling supporters cannot get the votes to pass a casino bill or a slot machine bill for racetracks. He has been warning legislators that allowing either to become legal could open Texas to flood of Indian gaming that the state could not control.

„We don't think they stand any more of a chance this session than the last," Kohler said.

Gov. Rick Perry remains „opposed to expanding the footprint of gambling," said spokeswoman Allison Castle.