

# Don't bet on Texas casinos

Galveston – The odds are against proposed legislation slotting a Las Vegas-style destination resort casino in Galveston, legislators and local pundits say.

“I haven't handicapped it yet,” said state Rep. Craig Eiland, D-Galveston. “I think the votes are probably there in the Senate, but I'm not sure they are in the House.”

Eiland said a constitutional amendment would be a better place to start a battle for casino gambling, not legislative proposals enabling casinos.

“Legislators ought to keep their attention focused on constitutional amendments and not on fighting over how to split up the pie,” he said, speaking by telephone from Austin.

Both Eiland and state Rep. Larry Taylor, R-Friendswood, pointed to Gov. Rick Perry's promise to veto any bill that would expand gambling in Texas as a major roadblock. A call for a constitutional amendment does not require his signature.

## Casino Bill

The casino proposal introduced Feb. 24 by Sens. Rodney Ellis, D-Houston, and John Carona, R-Dallas, includes these provisions:

- Twelve “destination resort” casinos. Possible locations include Galveston, South Padre Island, Bexar County, Tarrant County, Travis County, Dallas County and Harris County;
- Slot machines at existing horse and dog racing tracks, such as Gulf Greyhound Park in La Marque; and
- Casino gambling at three federally recognized Indian tribal lands.

The Ellis-Carona bill, if passed, would then require approval

of a constitutional amendment by two-thirds of lawmakers and state voters.

Backers of the bill estimate at least USD 3 billion could be added to state coffers. Of those funds, USD 1 billion would be dedicated to a trust fund for college scholarships, and USD 1 billion would go for highway construction.

### **'Blinded By The Glitz'**

Critics include Galveston businessman and community leader Harris L. "Shrub" Kempner Jr.

"This is a lousy financing scheme," he said. "Nobody understands the kinds of costs it imposes on the neighborhood. A lot of people are blinded by the glitz."

He also warned of unexpected consequences should such legislation be successful.

"I think the legislature has missed one bet," he said. Legislators are "not really paying attention to the overall advances to the rights of Indian tribes nationwide.

"The bottom line is that I believe if they introduce this level of gaming to the state, there will be no check on Indian tribes opening up casinos anywhere they want to in the state."

He expects such proposals to appear in future legislative sessions.

"It's a hardy perennial," he said.

### **Uphill Battle**

A.R. "Babe" Schwartz has seen a fair share of gambling proposals in the legislature. The retired veteran Texas lawmaker said he wouldn't bet on a successful casino bill this year.

"I think the odds are against it," he said, speaking by phone

from Austin. "We would have to see a lot of momentum toward getting 100 votes in the House, and it might be even harder to get 21 votes in the Senate."

A constitutional amendment proposal would also face an uphill battle, he said.

"My opinion is not terribly valid; I'm not taking any polls," he stressed.

"In order to have a constitutional amendment passed, it's going to take a bunch of lobbyists working 18 hours a day and getting promises that those votes are there."