

Florida Senate approves casino gambling expansion

The Florida Senate voted last Friday to advance a bill that would go beyond Governor Charlie Crist's compact with Seminole casinos, bringing expanded gambling to both racinos and tribal gaming venues.

The new bill would continue allowing blackjack at the Seminole casinos, but would also raise poker limits, provide blackjack at existing racinos, and give the tribe roulette and craps.

In exchange, the Seminoles would pay upward of USD 400 million annually, which would be earmarked for education. State Senator Dennis Jones said the new funds could cover the costs of paying 27,000 teachers.

The Senate vote of 27-11 means the measure will be sent to the state House. The House is considered markedly more conservative, and is in the process of debating its own gaming bill. The House version would reduce gambling from the Crist plan, outlawing blackjack throughout the state.

While Representatives are far more resistant to any gambling increase than the Senators, the House members have not come up with an acceptable plan to raise necessary state revenue without gaming. Negotiations toward a final state budget and comprehensive gambling bill may start today.

„I'm optimistic,“ said Senate President Jeff Atwater, regarding upcoming talks. “We have great respect for the House and the process they went through to get where they are.”