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Lawmaker backs off proposal to legalize video gambling

DEANNA MARTIN
Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS - A lawmaker who supports efforts to legalize and regulate [video gambling](#) machines in taverns and bars says he [will](#) not push such legislation this year - but that doesn't mean the issue is dead.

Rep. Win Moses, D-Fort Wayne, says regulating and taxing illegal video gambling machines, sometimes called "Cherry Masters," could generate \$200 million in [tax](#) revenue for the state. But there was not enough consensus among lawmakers and others on the bill, Moses said, so he wants to send the issue to a legislative study committee instead.

"I don't have a majority of people who say they think that this is a good idea," Moses said. "I have people who are quite willing to listen, and I have many more than that who are willing to tell me how to spend the money. But I have no consensus."

House Speaker Pat Bauer, D-South Bend, has called legalizing video poker machines a "long shot" for passing the Legislature this session.

"They would be virtually everywhere, on every city block, and that is a huge problem that I don't think people fully understand," Bauer said last week. "You triple the gambling you already have."

Supporters of the legislation aren't giving up hope that something will pass this year.

"There's always the possibility," said Senate Appropriations Chairman Robert Meeks, R-LaGrange. "The session is long and there's a lot of opportunities."

Senate President Pro Tem David Long, R-Fort Wayne, said the status quo is unacceptable. He said the state needs to do something this year - either step up enforcement to truly eliminate the machines or regulate and tax them.

"They're proliferating like cockroaches. They're everywhere and there are more of them every day, it seems like," Long said. "It needs to be handled. I don't think we should wink at illegal gambling any longer. Let's decide what to do with them once and for all."

The state has 20,000 to 30,000 illegal video gambling machines, Moses estimated. Supporters say regulating machines would reduce their numbers while keeping them in adult establishments such as bars and taverns, instead of places like convenience stores that children could enter.

The Indiana State Excise Police, the law enforcement division of the Alcohol and Tobacco Commission, has cracked down on illegal gambling machines in bars and taverns in recent years. But that has only driven the machines to other places, like back rooms in gas stations or even the backs of tractor-trailers, Meeks said.

"It's like prohibition when it just went underground and the only people who were making profits were the underworld," Meeks said. "By legalizing them, you limit the number that's available, limit who can play them and can limit the payout. Besides that, they're taxed. This is a dark crime and it ought to be regulated, taxed and brought out into the light."

The Indiana Licensed Beverage Association echoes those comments and has tried to drum up support to legalize the machines. Executive Director Brad Klopfenstein said he is still hoping for a bill this session that would regulate the machines.

"This is a better chance than we've had in the past," he said. "If the worst thing that happens is we get a study committee, that's still progress. But we certainly would like to see something go this time around."

Moses noted that no proposal is truly dead until the legislative session ends without it passing.

"In the Legislature, anything can happen," he said.

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