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INDIANA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Panel looks to toughen drive against gambling

Crackdown would target illegal video machines

By **Lesley Stedman Weidenbener**

lstedman@courier-journal.com
The Courier-Journal

INDIANAPOLIS -- Citing a proliferation of illegal video gambling machines, members of a key Senate committee are considering a crackdown on bars, truck stops, clubs and other retailers caught with the devices.

The plan developed by Senate Republican leaders would be the legislature's first significant step toward rooting out the tens of thousands of machines that operate under names like Cherry Master and Pot O' Gold.



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"This is a different approach," Sen. Jim Merritt, R-Indianapolis, said of a plan for a state crackdown on bars, clubs, truck stops and other businesses caught with illegal video gambling machines (By Lesley Stedman Weidenbener, The Courier-Journal)



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"They're everywhere, and they're growing in numbers," said Senate President Pro Tem David Long, R-Fort Wayne, one of the plan's authors.

But the proposal comes as bar owners and some other lawmakers are pushing to legalize the machines, regulate them and tax their earnings.

Long postponed a vote on the proposal

yesterday in the Rules Committee he chairs, saying members needed more time to learn about the issue and consider their options. "I wanted to start a discussion and see if there is something we can do about this," he said.

The committee is considering an amendment to House Bill 1510, a charity gambling regulation measure.

The amendment would provide nearly \$2 million for 25 police officers who would be dedicated to investigating illegal gambling. The measure also would increase the criminal penalties for people charged a second time with promoting professional gambling.

It also would authorize the state to revoke lottery contracts, retail merchant permits and state licenses that allow the sale of tobacco and alcohol held by any company or organization found with illegal gambling machines.

There also would be administrative and regulatory penalties for illegal gambling, which would take the issue out of the hands of county prosecutors, who are often reluctant to take on illegal gambling cases.

Currently, the Indiana State Excise Police raid bars, clubs and restaurants to shut down illegal machines, which puts the establishments' alcoholic beverage permits in jeopardy. Last year, excise police cited 435 gambling-related violations and seized computer chips from about 1,600 illegal video gambling machines.

But excise police Superintendent Alex Huskey told the committee yesterday that the effort has driven many of the machines into truck stops and other retailers that don't have alcohol permits. That makes it more difficult for law enforcement to act without cooperation from a prosecutor.

Huskey said hiring more excise police officers and giving the Alcohol and Tobacco Commission the authority to take away a retailer's ability to sell cigarettes would be significant changes.



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The Senate republican plan would allow the legislature's first significant attempt to root out the tens of thousands of illegal gambling devices. (By Michael Hayman, The Courier-Journal)

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"This is a different approach," said Sen. Jim Merritt, R-Indianapolis.

James Maida, president of Gaming Laboratories International, told the committee that illegal gambling machines can be manipulated to make maximum profits for owners and pay out little in prizes to players.

"These games are methodically taking players' money in a way that isn't fair," said Maida, whose company tests legal slot machines and other gaming devices for Indiana and other states, and in nations around the world.

Maida's staff accompanied the excise police on visits to several bars and clubs to teach the officers how to recognize an illegal machine and disarm it. He said the staff found that most of the machines pay out 50 percent to 70 percent of the money that is gambled in winnings to players. That contrasts with legal slot machines at casinos, which are required by law to pay out at least 80 percent of their take and typically pay more than 90 percent.

Maida told the committee that Indiana's struggle to deal with the machines is not unique and that dozens of states are considering similar questions. Some opt to crack down on the illegal machines to eliminate them, he said, while others legalize and regulate video gambling.

For years, Indiana lawmakers have been debating the legalization issue. Last week, Don Marquardt, president of the Indiana Licensed Beverage Association, urged a Senate committee considering a bill that would put slot machines at racetracks to remember that bar owners need help as well.

"Please consider an amendment to address our problems," he told the committee.


Sen. Bob Meeks, R-LaGrange, said then that he appreciated the plight of local bar owners and fraternal clubs and told the Tax and Fiscal Policy Committee that lawmakers need to make up their minds about the machines.

"We've got to make them legal or make them illegal," he said.

Long said yesterday that he hopes his proposal will spark just such a debate.

Reporter Lesley Stedman Weidenbener can be reached at (317) 444-2780.

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