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:: GAMBLING NEWS ::

### Slots Impasse Looms Over New Session

Jan 11, 2004



Nine months after the 2003 legislative session ended in an impasse over slot machine gambling, lawmakers return Wednesday for a new session no closer to agreement than when they left town.

"I thought there would probably be a bill by now with the House and Senate and governor on board and the governor leading the way," said Sen. Ulysses Currie, D-Forestville, chairman of the Budget and Taxation Committee. "I don't think we're even close."

The three key players - Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. and House Speaker Michael E. Busch - aren't even talking at this point about how they might reach an accommodation on slots.

Mr. Miller, D-Calvert, said it is up to Mr. Ehrlich to introduce legislation and use the powers of his office to help get it through the General Assembly. The governor said he will introduce a slot machine bill "because the (Senate) president asked me to do it. It's the right thing to do."

But Mr. Ehrlich said he is not going to expend a lot of political capital on slot machines unless he gets an agreement from Mr. Busch - who helped kill last year's bill - that he won't stand in the way again.

Mr. Busch, D-Annapolis - who holds the future of slot machine gambling in his hands, according to Mr. Miller and Mr. Ehrlich - isn't making any promises. Asked if a slots bill can pass before the 2004 session ends April 12, Mr. Busch said, "I think it's possible."

But the speaker said, "It is not my preference." The stakes are high for the racing industry, for public schools and for Mr. Ehrlich, who made slot

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machine gambling a centerpiece of his 2002 election campaign.

"The governor stands to gain the most politically" if the bill passes, said Paul S. Herrnson, director of the Center for American Politics and Citizenship at the University of Maryland, College Park. "Since it appears that that's the essential issue in his administration, it would be politically harmful for him should he be unable to pass it."

But Mr. Miller, who is a strong proponent of slot machines at racetracks, said his party would pay a political price if a bill does not pass this year.

"Democrats would be making a tragic mistake if they don't try and work with this governor, a tragic mistake," he said.

"This governor is saying no sales tax increase and no income tax increase," Mr. Miller said. That leaves slot machine revenues as the only funding source for the ambitious six-year, \$1.3 billion Thornton plan to increase state school aid, he said.

"If people care about public school funding ... then they are going to support this bill," Mr. Miller said.

A bill that was introduced by Mr. Ehrlich and approved by the Senate last year would have put 10,500 slot machines at Laurel, Pimlico and Rosecroft racetracks and would have authorized an additional 1,000 machines at a track proposed to be built in Allegany County. The governor and Mr. Miller said it would raise an estimated \$750 million a year in state revenues when all machines were in operation.

That estimate is too high, Mr. Busch said. To get that much money - with slot machines paying out 90 percent of the money put into them as payoffs to the players - "there would have to be \$300 million a week gambled at the three locations," the speaker said.

While Mr. Busch wouldn't rule out the possibility that a bill can pass this year, he made it clear there would have to be major changes before it can earn House approval.

For starters, Mr. Busch is adamantly opposed to putting all the slot machines at racetracks and giving a major share of the proceeds to track owners.

"There shouldn't be an unjust enrichment" of a few wealthy track owners, he said. "Why should the state give up that money?"

The governor and Mr. Miller argue that to save the racing industry, Maryland tracks must have slot machines to compete with tracks in West Virginia and Delaware that are earning millions of dollars annually in revenues from slot machine gambling.

Mr. Ehrlich proposed last year that tracks get 43.6 percent of the new gambling revenues, a little more than would have gone to public schools under his bill. But the Senate, before approving the bill, amended it so schools would get 46 percent of the revenue and tracks 39 percent.

Mr. Ehrlich said the bill he will introduce this year will be similar to last year's plan. That would not meet the conditions laid out by Mr. Busch.

The speaker said while racing has a great tradition in Maryland, he is opposed to giving millions of dollars to racetrack owners "who haven't

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done a very good job of managing their own business."

He also believes the three existing racetracks are not the best places to put slot machines. If the state decides to expand legalized gambling, Mr. Busch said there are other locations closer to adjoining states that would draw gamblers from outside Maryland and would bring in more money for the state.

Mr. Ehrlich will put money in next year's budget to pay for the third step of the Thornton plan. But he and his budget secretary, Chip DiPaula, said it will be impossible to implement the rest of the plan on schedule without additional revenues. The only way to get the money is with slot machines, Mr. DiPaula said.

None of the key players is willing to predict whether there will be a slots bill passed before the session ends or what such a bill might look like when it emerges from the legislative process.

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