

## R.I. casino question shifts odds in Mass.

By Robert Preer | November 5, 2006

Gambling and antigambling interests in Massachusetts, along with Bay State politicians, are eyeing Tuesday's Rhode Island referendum on a proposed casino in West Warwick less than 20 miles from the Massachusetts border.

If the measure passes and the \$1 billion Harrah's- Narragansett casino gets built, a formidable new competitor would face struggling racetracks in Massachusetts, including the Raynham Park dog track. On the plus side for track operators, if Rhode Island approves a casino, pressure could build on Beacon Hill to allow slot machines at Massachusetts tracks.

Recent polls have shown the Rhode Island casino trailing, but Harrah's Entertainment is pouring hundreds of thousands of dollars into advertising in the final days of the campaign. The opposition is well organized and includes two Ocean State venues that already have slot machines -- the Lincoln Park dog track and Newport Grand -- which, like the Massachusetts tracks, are worried about a nearby casino.

The debate in Massachusetts over expanded gambling has been going on for well over a decade. The issue comes up almost every year in the Legislature. Some on Beacon Hill think it's time to adopt the Rhode Island approach.

"We should just put it on the ballot," said Quincy state Senator Michael W. Morrissey, a Democrat. "It would settle the issue."

Bridgewater Representative David L. Flynn, also a Democrat and a supporter of slots, agrees. "We're looking into it at the present time," he said. "It seems the only route to go."

If the racetrack owners or others involved in the controversy take this approach, matters could get complicated. The animal welfare groups that tried and failed to get a greyhound racing ban on the ballot this year say they may try again in two years.

"It sure would be interesting if there were two referendums in 2008 -- one to give the race tracks slots and the other to outlaw greyhound racing," said Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA, which is leading the fight to outlaw dog racing.

Theil stressed, though, that the coalition of groups opposing dog racing has not decided whether to undertake what would be a difficult and costly referendum bid. The state Supreme Judicial Court invalidated the groups' referendum question this year. A 2000 measure to ban dog racing was narrowly defeated at the polls.