



POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Slots at Wichita Greyhound Park? Lawmakers again say no

BY JONATHAN SHORMAN
jshorman@wichitaeagle.com

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TOPEKA — A House committee rejected a gaming and racing bill on Wednesday, likely killing an effort this year to allow a revote on slot machines in Sedgwick County.

Supporters seeking the legislation wanted to revive the racing industry in south-central Kansas and other parts of the state, but concerns over a legal fight from existing casinos ultimately doomed the bill.

The House Appropriations Committee voted 13-8 against sending the bill to the House floor for debate. That came after the House Federal and State Affairs Committee voted to approve the bill earlier this year.

It unusual for two committees to work on the same bill, but the Appropriations Committee chairman, Rep. Troy Waymaster, R-Bunker Hill, said House Speaker Ron Ryckman had wanted the panel to examine the possible financial effects to the state.

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In the end, the committee concluded the potential risk was too high.

“We don’t know what impact this will have on us as a state, and I think that it is not doing due diligence for us to rapidly rush this out,” said Rep. Brenda Landwehr, R-Wichita.

The bill would allow Sedgwick County residents to gather at least 5,000 signatures for another vote to allow slot machines at the Wichita Greyhound Park near Park City. The track, owned by Phil Ruffin, closed in 2007 shortly after voters rejected placing slots in the county.

State law and gambling contracts were crafted about a decade ago with the intent that there wouldn’t be other gaming facilities with slot machines in Kansas until at least 2032.

The Kansas Star Casino in Mulvane paid a privilege fee to be the sole gaming facility in the south-central Kansas gaming zone, made up of Sedgwick and Sumner counties. Three gaming facility managers in three other gaming zones across the state also paid privilege fees

An Attorney General’s opinion last year over a similar bill said a vote on slots would breach the Kansas Lottery’s contract with Kansas Star Casino. A budget analysis of the this year’s bill also warned a revote to allow Wichita Greyhound Park to reopen with slots could be viewed as a prohibited expansion of gaming.

If this year’s bill violates a provision of previous law, the state would be required to pay back privilege fees to the casinos plus interest. The state says it has received \$61 million in privilege fees and that the interest payments could be at least \$50.9 million.

Some lawmakers argued the bill contained sufficient safeguards to minimize risk to the state.

“There is no risk, there is no downside,” said Rep. Sean Tarwater, R-Stilwell.

In the wake of the vote, Waymaster urged both sides to work to find a solution where the state would not face the risk of litigation.

“After many years of basically hearing the same story, I implore those on both sides to work together and put together a compromise,” Waymaster said.

Contributing: Daniel Salazar of The Eagle.

Jonathan Shorman: 785-296-3006, @jonshorman