

Boston Globe: Gambling's Social Costs

Officials say they can't predict gambling's social costs

Answer doesn't fly with lawmakers

By Andrea Estes, Globe Staff | November 1, 2007

State officials said they cannot predict how many Massachusetts residents would become compulsive gamblers if the state licenses three casinos, a view criticized by House members yesterday at a hearing on problem gambling.

According to current estimates, there are 123,000 to 250,000 problem gamblers in the state. How those ranks might swell if Governor Deval Patrick and lawmakers legalize gaming tables and slot machines cannot be forecast, said administration officials, because there are no up-to-date studies.

"It's impossible to extrapolate a number at this time," said Michael Botticelli, director of the Substance Abuse and Addiction Bureau of the Department of Public Health.

But lawmakers were dissatisfied with the answer. They argued that the administration shouldn't commit to the gambling proposal until they have a better grasp of the problem.

"I raise the question about whether we want Massachusetts to be the testing ground to figure out what those statistics are," said Representative Ruth Balser of Newton, House chairwoman of the Joint Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse and an opponent of Patrick's plan to license three casinos to Massachusetts.

"I'm not looking for an exact number," said Representative Thomas Conroy, Democrat of Wayland.

"Particularly when one is thinking about a location near Boston . . . you're talking about significant numbers."

Representative Daniel E. Bosley, House chairman of the Joint Committee on Economic Development and Emerging Technologies and a leading gambling opponent in the House, said he heard nothing during yesterday's hearing that would cause him to rethink his position.

"So far we haven't heard very much," he said. "We heard: 'We don't know how many people are going to become addicted. We don't know what this is going to cost us, but we're going to do it anyway.'"

Botticelli, Health and Human Services Secretary JudyAnn Bigby, and Public Health Commissioner John Auerbach defended Patrick's proposal yesterday, saying the state would mitigate social problems by setting aside millions of dollars to fight gambling addiction.

"The bill includes some of the most aggressive funding and regulatory structures of any state in the country to make sure that we are able to prevent and mitigate the potential negative impact of gambling in Massachusetts," Bigby said.

"The governor's legislation calls for setting aside 2.5 percent of gross gambling revenues and will establish a Public Health Trust Fund," she said. ". . . This set-aside far exceeds those of other states."

Bigby also pointed to the positive social attributes of casinos.

"Gambling and other forms of entertainment associated with resort casinos can also provide social benefits associated with increased social stimulation and reduction of isolation," particularly among the

elderly, she said.

Discussing the scope of the possible problems, state officials and gambling treatment specialists yesterday cited a 10-year-old study conducted by researchers at Harvard Medical School and the University of Toronto that concluded that 3 percent to 5 percent of people exposed to gambling for the first time will develop a gambling problem.

"This does not mean, however, that we will see this percentage increase in the prevalence of gambling disorders," said Botticelli. He said the vast majority of gamblers never develop chronic problems.

The informational hearing was sponsored by two joint committees of the House and Senate: Economic Development and Emerging Technologies and Mental Health and Substance Abuse.

Senators, many of whom back the governor's plan, did not attend the hearing. Some said they thought it was unfair to the governor to debate the potential negative consequences of casinos before the bill itself has a public hearing. Those hearings won't be held until next year.

The hearing was dominated by discussion of dangers. MIT researcher Natasha Schull described the druglike effect of slot machines, which she said induce gamblers to play until they run out of money. "What I learned is that this is more dangerous than I had known before," Balser said after the hearing. ". . . It's not a simple game of poker or betting on the outcome of a football game. We're talking about a machine that was designed to illicit an addictive response."