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## Pro-gambling governor could bring expanded gambling to New Hampshire

CONCORD, N.H. — For years, New Hampshire has resisted the siren song of casinos, saying large-scale gambling was out of sync with the state's family-friendly, White Mountains-seeking-tourist profile.

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But as Massachusetts moves forward with plans for three resort casinos, a call has gone up for New Hampshire to grab at the pot of gambling dollars, with the governor — in contrast to her predecessor — throwing support behind the idea of “one high-end, highly regulated casino.”

“We can no longer pretend that expanding gambling isn't coming to our communities,” Governor Maggie Hassan, a Democrat, said in her budget address to the Legislature last week. “The question is: Will we allow Massachusetts to take revenue from New Hampshire's residents to fund its needs, or will we develop our own plan that will allow us to address social costs and invest in our priorities?”

On Tuesday, a state Senate committee is scheduled to take up a bill that would license one casino. The measure is expected to pass the 24-member Senate, but could run into opposition in the 400-member House, where representatives have historically been leery of expanded gambling.

Gambling supporters say that lawmakers this year are likely to be swayed by the new governor's support, along with a sense of urgency to find revenue sources for restoring higher education funding, which was slashed in recent years.

“A lot of legislators campaigned on adding revenues to higher education so it really is a critical piece that won't be funded if they don't find the revenue source to do it,” said James Demers, a lobbyist for Millennium Gaming Inc., a Las Vegas company that has an option to buy Rockingham Park race track in Salem.

The company anticipates bidding for the license, which would come with an \$80 million fee, under the governor's budget proposal.

Opponents say that the gambling market in New England is saturated, and that the expected arrival of Massachusetts casinos only diminishes the chances of a New Hampshire casino's success.

“The Massachusetts market is not going to drive north to a smaller casino with fewer amenities and less flashy architect,” said Jim Rubens, chairman of the Granite State Coalition Against Expanded Gambling, a nonpartisan group.

And if Massachusetts residents don't drive north, then the people who patronize the New Hampshire casino will be New Hampshire residents who bypass other establishments, like restaurants, conference centers, and theaters, Rubens said.

“The revenue will be cannibalized from existing New Hampshire businesses,” he said.

Clyde Barrow, a casino specialist at the Center for Policy Analysis at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, said there are two distinct kinds of gamblers. Casino-bound gamblers who seek the glitzy option, but also convenience gamblers who value proximity over glitz. Barrow has consulted for the Greenmeadow Golf Club in Hudson, N.H., a group that considered bidding for a casino license.

Convenience gamblers in Lawrence or Lowell, or spots north, will happily patronize a southern New Hampshire casino, which would be easier to get to than one in, say, East Boston, he said.

“These are people who just want to play slot machines. They don't want to drive more than 30 miles. They don't care

about the other stuff. They just want the slot machines," he said.

Even as resort casinos in Las Vegas and Connecticut felt the pinch of the recession as people avoided destination vacations and opted instead for "staycations," less flashy gambling operations, the so-called convenience facilities, have done well in places like New York and Pennsylvania, Barrow said.

New England is increasingly becoming a popular gambling destination.

In Connecticut, there are the behemoth casinos, Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun.

In Rhode Island, voters in November approved table games at one facility, Twin River, in Lincoln.

In Maine, a casino has operated in Bangor since 2005, and in 2010, residents once again voted to expand gambling in Maine and allow a casino in Oxford County.

Only Vermont appears likely to remain opposed to expanded gambling. Currently, the state allows nonprofit organizations to run games of chance.

New Hampshire, since 2006, has allowed for-profit companies to operate games of chance, with at least 35 percent of profits going to a charity.

Previously, the law required that charities themselves operate the games. The rule change spurred a proliferation of so-called poker-parlors across the state, which specialists say essentially operate table games.

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