

Sides make their pitches at gaming forum

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Associated Press

By Travis Andersen, Town Correspondent

Democratic state Senator Patricia Jehlen – who represents Somerville – invited lawmakers on both sides of the expanded gambling question to make their case at a forum on Thursday night at Century Bank headquarters on Mystic Avenue in Medford.

In a room on the fifth floor packed with pro-gaming union members and anti-gaming residents, Jehlen took a bit of a gamble in her opening remarks.

"This is really going to be a wonderful evening," she said, before laying out a few ground rules.

Each lawmaker - pro-gaming state Representative Kathi-Ann Reinstein (D-Revere) and anti-gaming state Senator Susan Tucker (D-Lawrence) - would make presentations before a question and answer session.

In addition, audience members could write comments on index cards, which the lawmakers would review later on. Jehlen asked attendees to hold off on writing comments until the end of the presentation.

"Let's maintain the fiction at least that we have open minds," she said.

Then both lawmakers presented familiar arguments with a flair. Reinstein said expanded gaming - be it resort casinos or slots at the race tracks - would bring jobs to a neglected blue collar work

force and revenue to offset human service and education cuts in the down economy, while downplaying the social problems associated with compulsive gambling.

After all, she said, gambling revenue comes from patrons who freely choose to spend their "expendable income."

"I'm not going to tell people they can't go to a restaurant and get two glasses of wine with their expendable income," she said, adding that the biotech and film industries the state has lured with tax breaks won't help her working class constituents who need jobs.

"These people are not going to work in biotech," she said. "We need to be honest about that."

And they won't work in large numbers in the casino industry, Tucker countered. She cited studies suggesting that job creation would be minimal if casinos went up in the Bay State, claiming also that "predatory" slot machines would amount to a "regressive" tax on the poorest residents.

"This is not your father's slot machine," Tucker said, claiming that the pineapple and dollar-sign devices now have technology that turns casual players into addicts. Add the losses that would hit the state lottery and the costs of regulating casinos and slot parlors, she said, and the revenue estimates fly out the window.

"This scheme is the biggest transfer of wealth from working families into the hands of immensely wealthy out-of-state investors," she said.

During the question and answer session, union members in the crowd pressed Tucker for an alternative plan to create jobs in a down time for the building and manufacturing industries.

She said the trend has hit her district hard, but she doubted the state could even find investors to sink money into building casinos in a recession.

Anti-gaming residents, meanwhile, asked Reinstein about the addiction issue and the revenue that would go to casino executives out of state.

Reinstein said the social costs were real but overblown, and noted that many corporations headquartered out of state have set up shop in the commonwealth.

As the event drew to a close, Jehlen - who did not speak for or against expanded gaming - reminded attendees to write down comments for the lawmakers.

"You'll get extra points if you showed that you learned something," she said.

Several gaming measures are pending in the Legislature this session, including bills to license casinos and add slots to the race tracks.

"We don't know what the plan will be," Reinstein said.

State Representative Carl Sciortino and state Representative Denise Provost, both Somerville Democrats, were in attendance, along with Rebekah Gewirtz, a member of the Somerville Board of Aldermen.