

Lawmakers saw gambling's effect

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ANNAPOLIS — Sen. Thomas M. Middleton was a teenager growing up in Southern Maryland when his father lost a big chunk of income from the family farm playing slot machines.

He wasn't a compulsive gambler, said Mr. Middleton, Charles County Democrat, but on that summer day in 1955, Henry Middleton had a few drinks.

"He was feeling no pain," Mr. Middleton said. "He just happened to have the entire wheat check in his pocket, and he blew it all."

Mr. Middleton, who says the experience helped form his opposition to slot machines, is one of at least three lawmakers whose lives have been touched by gambling. Their experiences have led them down divergent paths as the General Assembly considers slot machine legislation that would drastically change the gambling landscape in Maryland.

Sen. Nancy Jacobs, Harford County Republican, voted for the slots bill, though she watched gambling destroy her brother's marriage.

"It was probably one of the toughest votes I will ever have to make," she later said.

House Speaker Michael E. Busch, Anne Arundel County Democrat, whose father spent the last 22 years of his life playing cards in Las Vegas casinos, is the legislature's most powerful opponent of the slot machine bill proposed by Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., a Republican.

But Mr. Busch said he has gotten

beyond his father's plight and that his opposition to slot machines is rooted more in the potentially destructive effects casinos and slot machines have on families and communities in which they are located.

With a week left before the scheduled end of the 2003 session, Mr. Ehrlich, Mr. Busch and other legislative leaders are involved in intense negotiations about the gambling bill, which would authorize installation of 3,500 machines each at three racetracks: Pimlico in Baltimore, Laurel in Anne Arundel County and Rosecroft in Prince George's County. Owners of a proposed track in Allegany County could operate as many as 1,000 machines.

The Senate passed the bill, but it is stalled in the House, where Mr. Busch is the most vocal and influential opponent.

The governor is promoting slot machines as the only way besides huge tax increases for Maryland to pay for a six-year plan adopted last year to increase school funding by \$1.3 billion.

Legislative fiscal advisers say the state would receive \$15 million from slot machines next year, in the form of fees paid by track owners. But revenues for schools would jump to \$375 million in fiscal 2006 and \$596 million in fiscal 2008.

Miss Jacobs said the money persuaded her to vote for slot machines.

"If we were not in the crisis we are in with the budget, I would have voted against this bill in a heartbeat," she said. "I saw [gambling] destroy my brother's marriage of 35 years. I know what can happen to a family because of this."

Mr. Busch said that gambling had a "devastating" effect on his family and his father.

His father, Larry Busch, left Maryland and had no contact with

his family until 1990, when he called his son.

During the next seven years, Michael Busch made several trips to Las Vegas to rebuild the relationship, even gambling with his father in casinos.

Mr. Busch says his visits to Las Vegas and Atlantic City, N.J., convinced him that big casinos with thousands of slot machines are bad for families and for the neighborhoods around them.

"I personally gamble," he said. "It's not something I have a moral objection to."

Unlike Larry Busch, Henry Middleton turned his back on gambling after losing about \$600 from his wheat crop and almost losing a farm that had been in the family since Colonial times. His son took over the farm after Larry Busch's death in 1991 and raises cattle, hay and pumpkins when he isn't busy with legislative duties.

When Thomas Middleton was growing up, slot machines were legal in Charles, Anne Arundel, Calvert and St. Mary's counties.

"Slot machines were constantly under your nose," he said. "They were a constant source of temptation."

The legislature voted in 1963 to get rid of slot machines, phasing them out over five years.

"My dad put a lot of energy into getting rid of slot machines," Mr. Middleton said. He said his father lobbied local legislators to persuade them to vote to repeal the slot machine law.

As Mr. Ehrlich and Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., Prince George's County Democrat, apply pressure to the legislature to approve the slot machine bill, Henry Middleton's son carries on the work his father began almost five decades ago, serving as a leading antislots voice in the legislature.

