

GOVERNMENT

Busch is key figure in anticipated 2004 Annapolis slots battle

BY TOM STUCKEY

Associated Press

As the House Ways and Means Committee prepares for yet another study of slot machines, one thing seems certain — legislators are in for another expensive battle over gambling when they return to Annapolis for the 2004 **General Assembly** session.

With the economy in the doldrums and state revenues stagnant, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. are promoting slot machines as the best way to raise as much as \$700 million a year that would go a long way toward solving Maryland's fiscal problems.

As the governor frequently tells audiences in his travels around the state, legalizing slots at race tracks is "a no brainer."

But Ehrlich and Miller don't want to wait until January to tackle the gambling issue. They would like the General Assembly to convene in a special session this summer or fall just to work on slot machines.

However, that would require the concurrence of the third major player in the slots battle, House Speaker Michael Busch, who was primarily responsible for killing Ehrlich's slots bill during the 2003 session that ended in April. Busch has said "no" to a special session, and his Ways and Means Committee has laid out a leisurely schedule that guarantees it will not complete its study of gambling until late this year.

With Miller and Ehrlich firmly on the side of gambling proponents, Busch's position will be a key to chances of legalizing slots next year.

The speaker likes to downplay his role in the gambling debate, which he says will without question wind up on the agenda for the 2004 session.

"I don't think any one person is going to be responsible for the outcome on slots one way or the other," Busch said.

But opponents and proponents of slots are closely watching the speaker's comments, searching for clues about what he will do next year.

So far, he has kept them guessing.

"I don't think that slots are a particularly good policy to start with," Busch said. "I don't think we should predicate balancing our budget off of revenues that we're not sure are going to materialize."

But the speaker said that doesn't mean he will use the power of his office to kill slots at the 2004 session that begins in January.

"We're going to have to take a look at what's going on around us," he said.

Delaware and West Virginia already have slot machines at race tracks, and the Pennsylvania Senate voted to allow as many as 3,000 slot machines at each of eight tracks. The bill has the support of Gov. Edward G. Rendell, but the House has not voted yet.

Authorization of slots at race tracks in Pennsylvania will increase pressure on the General Assembly to expand gambling in Maryland, Busch said.

That mirrors the argument made by Ehrlich, who says adjoining states are collecting millions of dollars annually from Marylanders who go to play the slots, money he says should be kept at home to help pay for Maryland schools.

While both sides agree slot machine



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House Speaker Mike Busch is again the gatekeeper in Maryland's slots debate, and has kept both sides guessing by saying the machines are not good policy while also saying they should be expanded from horse racing tracks.

gambling will be an issue again next year, no one, including the governor, is ready to commit to a specific proposal.

Ehrlich blames Busch for killing his bill last April, and has said he will not introduce legislation in January if he thinks the speaker will just kill it again. He is waiting for Busch to make the next move.

Busch had strong objections to portions of Ehrlich's bill, especially the governor's decision to limit slot machines to three existing racetracks — Pimlico, Laurel and Rosecroft — and a fourth track that has been proposed for Allegany County. The existing tracks could have each had up to 3,500 ma-

chines, and the proposed new track 1,500 machines

"One of my main concerns was enriching certain individuals because they happen to own a racetrack," the speaker said.

Busch believes the Legislature should at least consider other options, including putting slot machines in locations other than racetracks that would attract players from other states.

Busch also thinks the Legislature should look into whether the state should operate slot machine facilities instead of turning them over to track owners.

"The idea is how can the state best control and oversee the expansion of gaming if in fact we want to go in that direction," he said.

Paul Schurick, Ehrlich's communications director, said there are signs the Legislature is ready to move ahead with slot machine legislation. The governor, in turn, "has made it clear to the legislative leadership that he is not absolutely wedded to his original proposal," Schurick said.

He said Ehrlich is willing to consider all options if Busch "makes it clear that the bill can be fairly debated in the House."

While the Ways and Means Committee conducts its study and Busch keeps everybody guessing, supporters and opponents are preparing for what they believe will be an inevitable battle over gambling during the 2004 session.

"Absolutely, slots will be an issue," said Barbara Knickelbein, co-chairwoman of **NOcasiNO-Maryland**, an anti-gambling group. "We haven't killed the 800-pound gorilla yet. We've just kept the door shut to him."