

# Busch: Md. must look away from slots

Speaker meets with Magna,  
says special session unlikely

Track owner seeks O'Malley's help

By ANDREW A. GREEN

SUN STAFF

5.26.05

Maryland needs to discuss ways to make horse racing competitive without the legalization of slot machines, House Speaker Michael E. Busch said yesterday, all but ruling out a special session on gambling after meeting with industry officials.

Amid talk that Magna Entertainment Corp., owner of Laurel Park and Pimlico Race Course, could move the Preakness Stakes to another state, Busch met with company officials yesterday but said later that he sees almost no chance for a special session of the General Assembly to deal with the slot machine issue.

Company officials met earlier in the day with Mayor Martin O'Malley in the hope that the Baltimore Democrat could help broker a compromise to break an impasse that has frozen Annapolis since the election of Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. The Republican governor has made passing a slots bill his top legislative priority but has been unsuccessful for three consecutive years.

O'Malley "is a very impressive guy," said Dennis Mills, an executive vice president with Canada-based Magna. "He obviously has a lot of friends in both the Senate and the House, so I'm sure he will work with the president and the House leader to see if a reconciliation can happen."

Busch, the chief slots skeptic in the legislature, was less optimistic.

"They articulated the point of

view that horse racing is at a competitive disadvantage here," Busch said. "What does it take to make horse racing more competitive? What does it take to do that without slots? I think that is an alternative everybody must consider."

Yesterday's meeting came four days after the running of the 130th Preakness Stakes, the middle jewel in racing's Triple Crown, and amid concern, fanned by the governor, that this year's race could be the last in Maryland.

Mills said he was pleased with the discussion and hopeful that Maryland leaders would reach a consensus on a way to help horse racing, which he said is suffering because tracks in neighboring states augment their purses with proceeds from slot machines.

Tracks in Delaware and West Virginia have slots, and legislators in Pennsylvania have approved them for tracks and other sites.

"We remain optimistic that all legislators here will do what needs to be done," Mills said.

Despite Busch's reluctance, Mills said that slots are an essential component of any strategy to improve Maryland racing. The company's two tracks in the state need major overhauls to make them more attractive to customers, and even seemingly simple improvements such as allowing racing at night would require a substantial investment, he said.

"When you go to the bank to request money for those things, you've got to have a business plan that promises a return," Mills said, adding that the advantages slots provide in surrounding states make borrowing in Maryland more difficult.

Mills refused to answer questions about whether Magna is considering moving the Preakness, replying that his company doesn't believe in making

*"What does it take to make horse racing more competitive? What does it take to do that without slots? I think that is an alternative everybody must consider."*

Michael E. Busch, speaker,  
House of Delegates

threats and instead prefers to forge consensus.

Busch said company officials did not make any threats in their private meeting, which lasted 90 minutes.

Before meeting with Busch, Mills and other Magna officials came to Baltimore to see O'Malley, who has endorsed a limited slots-at-tracks program, provided that safeguards are put in place to protect surrounding communities.

His stance puts him at odds with the vast majority of House delegates from Baltimore.

Last week, a spokesman for the mayor said O'Malley was not actively engaged in lobbying on the issue. But at the Preakness, O'Malley blamed Ehrlich for the failure of slots plans, saying that his inability to work with Democratic leaders in the legislature was putting Maryland's horse racing industry at risk. A spokesman for the mayor did not return a phone call seeking comment last night.

The speaker blocked votes on Ehrlich's slots plans in the first two years of the governor's term, but this year the House passed its own slots proposal by the narrowest possible margin.

The House plan would have allowed 9,500 machines divided among four sites in Allegany, Anne Arundel, Frederick and Harford counties. Exact locations would be decided by a commission controlled by the legislature.

The Senate plan, backed by the governor, was more expansive, allowing 15,500 slot machines at seven locations to be decided by a panel controlled by the governor.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, a strong slots supporter, balked at the House plan, and when the session ended last month, neither plan passed both chambers.

Mills said yesterday that Magna would have been happy with either plan.

Del. Peter Franchot, a Montgomery County Democrat and outspoken slots opponent, said the argument Magna made is not one that will change minds in the House.

"They finally came back to where they started, which is: We need slots for Magna. All of this other rhetoric, 'We need slots for education and the kids,' we've always contended has been a pack of lies promoted by Ehrlich," Franchot said

Del. Anthony J. O'Donnell, the minority whip from Calvert County, said Marylanders are upset about the uncertain future of the state's horse racing industry. He said Busch is out of step if he believes that some solution other than slots can save the Preakness.

"If you do something else, that's not going to stem the flow of hundreds of millions of dollars out of the state every year to Delaware and West Virginia and Pennsylvania," O'Donnell said.

Busch said it would be nearly impossible to develop a consensus behind any bill before lawmakers return to Annapolis in January because legislators are now home and focused on their families and jobs. He said he doesn't see an emergency sufficient to warrant a special session and that he hasn't seen any evidence that many delegates have changed their minds on the issue.

"For the members, this isn't just about horse racing," Busch said. "It's a defining vote for them on the future of Maryland and of their communities."