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Time for more gambling?

Beverage group, some lawmakers say video machines should be legal

By **Mary Beth Schneider**
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You can roll the dice at a casino, play bingo at the church hall, bet the trifecta at the racetrack and scratch off your way to a jackpot at the gas station.

STATEWIDE MEETINGS

The Indiana Licensed Beverage Association is holding a series of meetings statewide to build public support to legalize video gaming machines:

- **Wednesday:** 2 p.m., Bluffton American Legion; 7 p.m., Fort Wayne American Legion Post 4830.
- **Thursday:** 2 p.m., South Bend AmVets Post 66; 7 p.m., East Chicago American Legion Post 369.
- **Tuesday:** 2 p.m., Noblesville VFW Post 6246; 7 p.m., Beech Grove American Legion Post 276.
- **Sept. 20:** 2 p.m., West Lafayette American Legion Post 492.
- **Sept. 26:** 2 p.m., Evansville Eagles Aerie 427; 7 p.m., Tell City Moose Lodge.
- **Sept. 27:** 2 p.m., Terre Haute American Legion Post 104; 7 p.m., Bedford Eagles Aerie 654.

Gov. Mitch Daniels took office in 2005.

State Rep. Win Moses, D-Fort Wayne, compared the situation to Prohibition, in which outlawing alcohol only made it proliferate with no regulation.

Now, some Hoosiers think it's time to let people play video gambling machines at their local American Legion hall or other club.

The Indiana Licensed Beverage Association is holding a series of public meetings around the state starting today. The aim is to convince lawmakers to make those gambling machines legal when the General Assembly convenes in January.

Legalizing the machines would be OK with Dave Heath, chairman of the Indiana Alcohol and Tobacco Commission, which regulates and licenses those clubs. The State Excise Police, the commission's enforcement arm, hunts down and seizes the machines.

"We need to really look at it," Heath said, encouraging lawmakers to debate the issue.

Sen. Robert L. Meeks, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, agrees.

"I've been in favor (of legalizing video gambling machines) for years," said Meeks, a LaGrange Republican and former state trooper.

Making such machines illegal hasn't stopped clubs and businesses from having them nor prevented people from playing them, he said.

"We have driven them underground," Meeks said -- something Heath agrees has happened, as the state stepped up enforcement since

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Making the video gambling machines legal would allow the state to regulate them, ensuring fair payouts to gamblers and giving the state a share of the pot, Moses and Meeks said.

That's the case the Indiana Licensed Beverage Association hopes to make in the meetings it is holding at 11 American Legion and other service lodges and posts statewide.

Among them is the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 6246 in Noblesville, which will host a meeting Tuesday. Frank Perkins, post quartermaster, said the post had video gambling machines about 10 years ago, and a former commander ended up in jail for a couple hours when a machine was seized by police.

They haven't had one since, he said, but thinks the state should consider legalizing them.

"It would be a good deal for everyone," Perkins said, saying the state would get tax revenue, the post's 500 members would have a chance at the winnings and the post would get needed funds to both pay the rent and support its charities.

They already pay \$5,000 a year to the state to have a pull-tab machine, a slot-machine-like gambling he said, that fee will go up to \$10,000. The post earns about \$250,000 a year from the pull-tabs, he said, goes back to the community, "either as winnings or to charities.

Adding the video gambling machines would complement that, he said. But he's not optimistic the machines legal.

"The gambling boat casinos want this all to themselves," he said.

Mike Smith, a former Republican legislator who now is executive director of the Casino Association organization would have to study the details of any legislation before deciding whether to support it. That allowing video gaming devices at clubs would turn them into "miniature land-based casinos."

Brad Klopfenstein, executive director of the Indiana Licensed Beverage Association, argues that legal machines would not threaten riverboat casinos. Those are entertainment destinations, he said, that cater to a larger audience than a tavern.

He cited the many legal gambling games and venues already in Indiana.

"It's silly to say those are all OK but not video gambling," he said.

Besides, he added, "it also would be a little cash cow for the state of Indiana."

A 2003 study for the beverage association showed the machines could generate \$300 million annually for the state and local governments, he said.

With Daniels wanting to implement full-day kindergarten and the state looking for ways to give proper use of that money could spur lawmakers to legalize the machines, he and other supporters hope.

Lawmakers, though, have been resistant. Few bills legalizing the machines have been filed over the years, and none have passed out of a committee.

Rep. Marlin Stutzman, R-Howe, is chairman of the House Public Policy and Veterans Affairs Committee. He holds the House in the Nov. 7 elections, Stutzman would have a key role to play on all gambling issues. He is unlikely to grant any bill legalizing video gaming a hearing and is opposed to any expansion of gambling.

House Speaker Brian C. Bosma, R-Indianapolis, said that, "If you're a betting person, there's probably an expansion of gambling (some) year in the General Assembly."

If he's still speaker next year, he said, he'd make sure the issue had to pass or fail on its own merits, rather than being tacked onto some other popular bill that lawmakers would be loathe to oppose.

House Minority Leader B. Patrick Bauer, D-South Bend, expressed reservations.

"People are losing their life savings (by gambling). We have made it available everywhere. That's a problem."

Today -- the same day the beverage association begins its meetings to spur the legalization of video gaming, the Indiana Coalition on Problem Gambling will begin holding its three-day convention in Jeffersonville.

Jerry Long, executive director of the group, said the coalition doesn't take a position for or against gambling if the state does legalize video gaming, he would hope that some of the revenue would go to help address problem gambling.

gambling creates. A portion of tax revenue from existing gambling already goes to the state Division and Addiction.

Bauer blamed the Daniels administration for pushing the issue to the point where the legislature may soon whether to make these machines legal or not. By cracking down on American Legion and VFW the machines, "he's created a crisis," Bauer said. "He should do the answering."

Daniels repeatedly has said that the state cannot ignore the law.

Until the legislature reaches a consensus, he said, "we'll continue to enforce the law when we come

There have been many. Alex Huskey, superintendent of the State Excise Police, said that from Dece - the most recent statistics he had available -- the state seized 517 gambling machines from 119 loca he suspects thousands more machines are out there.

Rep. James R. Buck, R-Kokomo, said the prevalence of legal gambling methods doesn't mean the s all those video gaming machines.

Indiana, he said, has become addicted to gambling, with the state depending too much on the money coffers. But that addiction, he said, is no excuse for adding one more gambling outlet.

"Just because you've sunk yourself to your waist," Buck said, "doesn't mean you need to sink to your

Call Star reporter Mary Beth Schneider at (317) 444-2772.

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