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Group insists video gambling should be legal

By Jonathan Babalola

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Indiana lawmakers should relent and legalize electronic gambling in bars and other places that sell alcohol, according to representatives of an Indianapolis-based grass-roots movement.

Officials from the Indiana Licensed Beverage Association met with about 15

small bar and club owners this week at the VFW Post 6246, 654 S. Ninth St.,

to discuss how to convince state legislators to permit video gaming when the

General Assembly convenes in January.

"It's like the days of Prohibition," said Don Marquardt, state president for

the ILBA. "The state of Indiana right now has a prohibition on electronic gaming devices. These things are running wide open in northern Indiana, but like alcohol in the '30s it's just that the activity has been shoved



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underground.”

The non-profit organization, formed in 1933, represents businesses licensed by the state that sell alcohol. According to Marquardt, they have about 700 members — mostly from small bars and clubs — and they represent about 10 percent of the licensed businesses in the state.

“Gambling didn't use to be our No. 1 issue, but once they (the government) started to take it away from everybody, it escalated it up our charts,” said Marquardt, who also owns a restaurant in Angola. “It used to be ignored and now they're trying to enforce it, but unfortunately they only enforce it on us.”

Bill Smythe, the ILBA's local president for Hamilton County, added that many Indiana legislators are not well-versed on the issue, and that is why they are against video gaming.

“I think they're not fully informed,” said Smythe, whose Claude & Annie's restaurants include a location in Fishers. “I think a lot of the legislators think that owners are going to pop in a unit and set it right on a table and kids are going to get at it. The objective is to put them in places where they can be regulated and under control.”

The group estimates the state would bring in \$300 million on the games alone — with \$200 million going to the state and the remainder staying in counties.

They also promote a system of restricting access to minors, regulation by the state of the types of machines and payouts and reducing the number of prohibited machines.

“Let's get these things out of the laundromats and truck stops,” said Brad Klopfenstein, ILBA executive director. “We've got 30,000 to 40,000 illegal machines operating underground at those places, so if we limit them to five per establishment and about 3,000 owners take advantage, you're already reducing the number of machines by eliminating those illegal ones.”

Some of the owners who attended said that they are interested but are skeptical about how profitable a venture like this would be for smaller businesses.

Noblesville Mayor John Ditslear and Steve Holt, president of the Hamilton County Commissioners, said they did not know about the ILBA's position and

reserved comment on the issue until they could get more information on electronic gaming in the state.

Marquardt said state officials decided the moral issue when they voted for a state lottery in 1988, and now they need to come to an agreement and deal with the matter, because he does not see it going away anytime soon.

"They opened that box with the lottery and then came the riverboats and other forms of gambling, but the state has continuously turned their back on this form of gambling," he said. "It's still going on, and we feel that the state needs to make a full-fledged, honest effort to either get rid of all of it or actually legalizing it."

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