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Legalizing electronic gaming

Association asks bar owners to work grassroots.

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SOUTH BEND -- Leaders of the Indiana Licensed Beverage Association came to town Thursday to build support for legalizing electronic gaming machines.

They found a receptive audience at the Amvets Post 66 on Western Avenue. More than 80 area bar owners and representatives of fraternal and social clubs that serve alcohol attended.

The group heard about plans to try again next year to convince members of the state legislature to legalize electronic gaming. The meeting is one of 11 across the state to build support for legalization.

"We hope to have everyone leave with one unified message: to go out and put themselves into action, get contacts made and hopefully we'll get this done this legislative session," said Brad Klopfenstein, executive director of the ILBA.

"We want bars and restaurants to tell



Don Marquardt, president of the Indiana Licensed Beverage Association, attempts to gain support for legalizing electronic gaming machines during a meeting Thursday for bar club owners at the Amvets Post 66 on Western Avenue in South Bend.

Tribune Photo/BARBARA ALLISON

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their patrons and clubs to tell their members to tell their legislators it's something they want legalized," he said.

Don Marquardt, president of the ILBA, said he believes the atmosphere in the General Assembly may be more receptive to the measure than before. The emphasis this year is on public policy issues, Marquardt said, rather than money.

The ILBA wants to focus on measures of the proposed law that would "restrict, regulate and reduce" the number of machines, Marquardt said.

Minors' access to machines would be restricted by allowing the machines only in establishments open only to adults 21 and older.

Currently, electronic gambling machines are found in convenience stores, laundries, service stations, truck shops and bait shops, Klopfenstein said. Yet, state excise police focus enforcement only on businesses with liquor licenses because they have no real power in the others, he said.

Legalizing the machines -- which Klopfenstein said would be like electronic slot machines -- would limit the number of machines per location and the number of businesses with machines.

He said that would reduce the number of machines in operation -- now estimated at 40,000 -- even though it is technically not legal in Indiana (a ban frequently ignored).

The proposed legislation would limit the number of machines to five per establishment, Marquardt said, and require an annual fee of \$500 to \$1,000 per machine.

Frank Linarello, owner of Frank's Place in South Bend, is a supporter of legalizing the machines, but is skeptical of what the General Assembly will do.

"Indiana already said gambling is OK," Linarello said before the meeting, pointing out casino boats and the state lottery.

Klopfenstein noted private clubs can even have bingo and pull taps.

"It's a double standard," Linarello said. "I think they should legalize it and let local municipalities receive tax dollars. They need to make the playing field fair for everybody."

As someone who has attended such meetings in the past, Linarello is not overly optimistic of success. He said one legislator, who's not running for reelection, told him the General Assembly just won't approve it.

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