

Amid the debate over slots, some unlikely alliances

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Larry Carson, The Baltimore Sun

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setTimeout('document.getElementById("adl_S_46682").src="http://mi.adinterax.com/customer/tribune/bsc_centerstage_cube_0808.js?adxq=1219783425"',1)The November referendum on whether to allow slot machine gambling in Maryland is producing some unlikely buddying up among Howard County's elected officials.

Democratic Del. Elizabeth Bobo finds herself on the same side as state Sen. Allan H. Kittleman and Del. Gail H. Bates, Republicans who also want to see the referendum defeated.

Despite that, Bobo and Kittleman said that they suspect most Howard residents favor the idea to allow gambling at five locations in Maryland.

The majority of Howard's 11 state legislators, five County Council members and County Executive Ken Ulman favor passage of the referendum, if only to avoid more state budget cuts or tax increases that the resulting \$660 million revenue shortfall could bring.

Bobo, like Maryland Comptroller Peter Franchot, is opposed to the concept of gambling as a way to provide state revenue. Bates opposes gambling for religious reasons. Kittleman said he favors slots as a revenue raiser but strongly objects to listing specific locations - the measure spells out Baltimore City and Allegany, Anne Arundel, Cecil and Worcester counties - in the language of the referendum question.

None of the locations is in Howard County, though Laurel Park Race Track, a likely location, is just over the border in Anne Arundel.

Bobo believes that any revenue from slots would be short and not permanent, especially because competition will grow with Pennsylvania joining Delaware and West Virginia in the business.

"I'm not convinced the revenue will come in the way it is predicted," she said. "Short-term financial planning gets us in big trouble."

A wealthy state like Maryland should be able to balance the budget without gambling, Bobo said.

Kittleman favors slots but called for creating a commission to choose locations instead of letting elected officials choose specific places to be included in the referendum.

"I think the people of Howard County will understand that it's not wise to put locations for slots in the [state] constitution," he said. "Right now, we've just decided who is going to be multimillionaires in Maryland."

The third Howard Republican, Del. Warren E. Miller, sympathizes with Kittleman but also wants to help the state's horse breeders.

Bates said that she is not sure how the voting will go, but she also opposes having the locations in the referendum.

If slots are defeated, of course, Gov. Martin O'Malley would have to make up for the loss of projected revenue. Any further tax increases or funding cuts would play into the hands of Republicans heading into the 2010 elections.

For others, however, the need to raise new state revenue from slots trumps all other considerations.

"I think people are aware we had to raise taxes this year, and if this doesn't pass it could mean that same thing possibly again," said Senate majority leader Edward J. Kasemeyer. "Based on that alone, I support it."

His Democratic colleague, state Sen. James N. Robey, agreed.

"I'm not a gambler, but I'm a realist," said Robey, a former county executive and police chief.

In addition, Dels. Frank S. Turner, Guy Guzzone, Steven J. DeBoy and James E. Malone, all Democrats, favor slots. Most predict that the measure will pass, if narrowly.

"I think it's going to be close, but I think it will win," Guzzone said, adding that he is no fan of slots but believes that the state needs the money.

"I'd prefer not to do it. But given all the circumstances and where we are right now, I'm going to personally vote for it."

Malone, a delegate who represents parts of Elkridge, Ellicott City and Baltimore County, said he has been a slots supporter from the start. The specifics of the referendum legislation are a representation of democracy at work, he said.

"One of the things I have learned in my 14 years [as a delegate] is to compromise," Malone said. "This legislation was a compromise."

Del. Shane Pendergrass favored having the referendum, but she said she is not sure how she will vote.

Turner, who serves on the Ways and Means Committee, said he is worried about the potential consequences if the measure were to fail.

"A lot of good programs and county funding could be lost," he said. "There's absolutely no will to raise any taxes."

Ulman also thinks the referendum will prevail, he said, because voters would choose that over higher taxes as a means to raise revenue.

But Councilman Calvin Ball, an east Columbia Democrat, said the few voters who have raised the slots issue with him oppose slots because of the crime, addictions and other vices that often accompany gambling.

Courtney Watson, the council chairwoman and an Ellicott City Democrat, also believes that slots might lose, and Mary Kay Sigaty, a west Columbia Democrat, said she is not sure yet but is inclined to vote against it.

Republican Greg Fox and Democrat Jen Terrasa have no firm position, they said.