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County leaders favor tax hikes over slot machines

Leggett has maintained there is no other way to tackle state, county deficit

by Janel Davis | Staff Writer

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The state's slots debate has made its way to the county with the county executive and some members of the County Council divided on whether slots should be the solution for bolstering state and county budgets.

As officials grapple with a floundering economy — decreased tax revenues, stagnant job market and declining home prices — some leaders have proposed expanding gambling within the state as a way to protect the state's future economy.

With few options for increasing revenues, County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has said that slots may be the only answer to securing money for the county and other jurisdictions. A longtime slots opponent, Leggett is expected to announce his position on a Nov. 4 slots referendum soon.

On the other side, a group of County Council members held a press conference in Rockville on Monday denouncing slot machines and the referendum. Joined by a coalition of state legislators and civic representatives, the four council members recommended expanded tax increases in lieu of slots.

Councilman George L. Leventhal read from a 2005 report from J. Joseph Curran Jr., then the Attorney General, citing the negative aspects of gambling listed in the report, including increased crime rates, domestic violence, child abuse and addiction.

"I am against any strategy and economy where you've got winners and losers," said State Sen. Jamie B. Raskin (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park.

"[Slots] can produce real devastating consequences for families. ... We'd be sending a poor message to our children."

If approved, 15,000 slot machines will be located at five locations in Allegany, Anne Arundel, Cecil and Worcester counties and Baltimore city. The machines are expected to generate about \$700 million a year in revenue for the state, money that slots supporters — including Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) — say will help pay for citizen services and continue



Laurie DeWitt/The Gazette
Del. Heather Mizeur talks in front of a crowd of about 20 at a Rockville rally against legalizing slot machines.



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The state would experience its first significant revenue in fiscal 2011, which begins in July 2010. Although the revenues would not be available to help plug the state's \$1 billion deficit and the county's \$250 million gap next year, supporters say slots could prevent these types of future shortfalls.

"If not slots, where do you cut?" asked Steve Kearney, a slots advocate at Monday's rally in Rockville. "They are already talking about cutting bus routes and furlough days [in the county]. How are they going to pay for everything?"

Kearney, former spokesman for O'Malley, attended Monday's announcement with a handful of slots supporters, including one holding a sign telling reporters to "Ask [the lawmakers] what they will cut? Education? Healthcare?"

For Leggett, the slots debate is more about finances than politics, spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield said. Under the current fiscal outlook, the county's deficits are expected to continue past next year, meaning tough budget decisions for the executive and council.

"From a pragmatic point of view he is making clear that this is what he needs to do to protect Montgomery County, and I think people will understand that," said Gail Ewing, a former County Councilwoman.

But instead of using a solution that is "unworthy of the Democratic Party," state leaders should work on a plan of tax increases to generate additional money for the state — and consequently the county, Councilman Marc Elrich said.

Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park supports enforcing a 1 percent tax on services such as legal and consulting services. With such a small tax, backlash from companies — similar to the outcry over an overturned computer services tax this year — should not occur, he said.

A report on a possible services tax, as well as other alternatives including an increased liquor tax and a progressive income tax, is expected soon from state lawmakers assigned to study several of the tax increases mentioned at Monday's announcement.

The slots opponents on the council join State Comptroller Peter V.R. Franchot (D) in the ongoing debate over the state-sponsored gambling.

Last month an informal survey conducted by the Montgomery County Central Committee at the county fair found 37 percent of 600 people surveyed supported slots. Fifty-six percent opposed slots and 7 percent were undecided.

The nine-member County Council has not taken a vote or position on slots or the referendum, and does not plan to, according to Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown. Takoma Park and Rockville City councilmen said their council's would probably vote on the issue within the next few weeks.

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