

National Gambling Impact Study Commission Public Comment

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The Illinois General Assembly passed the Riverboat Gambling Act without a vote of the people. As citizens throughout the state discovered that developers and city council members from their communities were asking for riverboat licenses, grassroots action groups were formed to place the issue on the ballot. (Attachment #1) This was the only way citizens could be heard.

Many elected officials left office and then became lobbyists for gambling interests. (Attachment #2) At first these former officials worked to secure one of the ten riverboat licenses for their clients. Later the lobbyists worked to change the law to allow land-based casinos, riverboats for Chicago, additional riverboats, dock-side gambling, splitting and moving licenses. I began attending Legislative hearings on gambling proposals in 1993. At that time no public comment was allowed. Legislators heard elaborate proposals and saw beautiful drawings of riverboats. No one asked if the citizens in those communities supported the idea.

In 1994 Rep. Lou Lang finally gave citizens the opportunity to speak before a Legislative Committee that heard proposals from groups who wanted additional riverboat licenses. (Attachment #3)

In 1995 ILLCAAP began coordinating the statewide effort to oppose the expansion of gambling and calling for a statewide referendum. (Attachment #4) Republican leadership killed the statewide referendum bill in a House Committee. The bill passed in the Senate, but it was kept bottled up in the House Rules Committee. Towards the end of the session, I received a call from the House Parliamentarian saying that our bill was being amended and would be heard in Executive Committee that afternoon. The bill would also contain dock-side gambling and a provision to move riverboats to other communities. If that law passed, the referendum would be a "moot" point, because the riverboats would be permanently moored as land-based casinos. (Attachment #5) We were unable to get a copy of the amendment from the Republican staff in advance of the hearing. Two minutes before the amendment was called in Committee, we borrowed a copy from a reporter in the room. The House leadership treated us and the citizens' efforts with disrespect and disdain.

A month after the session ended, Senator Pate Philip, President of the Senate, asked the Attorney General for an opinion about moving the Silver Eagle Riverboat license to Danville. The boat would have to be permanently moored to be located in the Vermillion River in Danville. Thankfully, the Attorney General ruled that it would take Legislative action to change the Riverboat Gambling Act. (Attachment #6)

During the 1996 Legislative Session, our coalition again pushed to pass legislation for a statewide referendum. Republican leadership in the House and Senate introduced a resolution to form a Legislative Gambling Study Task Force to study all aspects of gambling. We were told that there would be no need for a statewide referendum and no gambling legislation would be considered during the session. However, the Senate passed the "Video Gambling Act", to legalize video gambling at Veteran and Fraternal Organizations. While we were meeting with the House Parliamentarian and Chief Attorney, the Video Gambling Act was assigned to a committee in the House. When we objected, we were told this was not a gambling bill, it was a Veteran's Bill! The bill went to a House Committee where it was amended to include video gambling in taverns and all restaurants that sold alcohol. The bill was held in committee.

During the summer of 1996 the Legislative Gambling Study Task Force held three public hearings. The majority of Legislators who served on this Task Force were pro-gambling. The Task Force heard testimony from experts in the field of economics and gambling addiction. They also heard testimony from organizations (i.e. Chicago Crime Commission, Better Government Association, NAACP, United Methodist Church, Focus on the Family and Illinois Family Institute, National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling, Concerned Women for America of Illinois), grassroots activists, and individuals from throughout the state who are opposed to the expansion of gambling in Illinois. The Task Force also heard testimony from gambling interests and organizations who wanted land-based casinos in Chicago, slot machines at race tracks, dock-side gambling, additional riverboats, and keno. A summary report was issued in January, 1997 with no recommendations. (Attachment #7)

Approximately 50 gambling bills were introduced in the Spring Session of 1997. For the most part the public was shut out of the process in the House Executive Committee as no public comment was allowed before the bills were voted out of committee. Rep. Lou Lang introduced the Omnibus Gambling Act that included something for everyone: land-based casinos for Chicago, additional riverboats, dock-side gambling, slot machines at race tracks, a graduated tax on riverboats to help with school construction, and funding for compulsive gambling. (Attachment #8) Although this bill was not called for a vote, two "shell" bills were passed. The language for the bills was drafted behind closed doors by a Conference Committee. Only one hour's notice is required before the conference committee reports are heard in committee--this is the only time public comment is allowed on proposed legislation!

The first bill legalized slot machines at race tracks, added one more riverboat license, and permitted riverboats to be permanently moored. The bill was revised many times during the final days of the Spring Session (1997), but agreement could not be reached before the session ended.

The second bill in Conference Committee called for dock-side gambling and moving/splitting licenses. The Governor's Education Bill included a graduated tax on riverboats. Senator Philip said since Legislators were going to raise the taxes on the riverboats, it was only fair that the boats get be given dock-side gambling! Senators passed this bill in the evening, on the last day of the Veto Session (November, 1997). Senators were told that a local referendum would be held before changing to dock-side gambling. The actual wording said the matter would be decided by a local referendum or by the Illinois Gaming Board. The bill was killed in the House Committee because there was nothing in the bill for Rosemont, Chicago, or the race tracks. Last Thursday we heard that another Conference Committee report was being drafted for dock-side gambling--one week before the General Assembly is scheduled to adjourn.

In Illinois the effort to expand gambling has not come from the public. Newspaper polls conducted in 1994 showed that the people in Illinois were evenly divided on the issue of gambling expansion. Two years later, the polls showed the people were opposed by a margin of 2 to 1. Greed is the motivating factor in gambling legislation. Newspapers document the large number of campaign contributions from riverboat gambling interests. According to the final report of the Illinois Campaign Finance Task Force (1/29/97), "Gambling interests contributed only about \$50,000 in 1990, but their contributions soared to more than \$1 million in the 1994 election cycle." Legislators do not want to raise the income tax or sales tax for fear of losing in the next election. Instead, they (Legislators) look to gambling expansion as a source of revenue, and fail to study the societal costs to protect the interests of the general public. In the late 1980's Legislators used "economic development and jobs" as an excuse to legalize riverboats in Illinois. Today "competition between the states" is the excuse given to change current law.