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Gambling shows process is quicker, less controlled

By JOHN HANNA
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Two weeks ago, if someone wanted to read the casino-and-slots bill that would pass the Legislature and make perhaps the biggest social and political change in Kansas in the past 20 years, its sponsors didn't have a copy to share.

Even some supporters didn't see the text of the 98-page gambling proposal until the House began debating it March 22. Six days and 10 hours later, it was on its way to Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, who'll sign it and make Kansas the only state to operate its own casino resorts.

Opponents were angered that such a big bill could fly through the Legislature so quickly. Supporters took advantage of long-term changes in how the Legislature operates, accomplishing something that would have seemed inconceivable two decades ago.

That process - looser, far less predictable and less controlled from the top - has flaws that gambling opponents were quick to note, such as the ability to pass such a big proposal with a minimum of fly-specking. But there's an advantage, too: It's far more difficult for one person or a small group to thwart the will of legislative majorities, if those majorities are determined and spend some time on strategy.

"That's not unique to Kansas. That's a national trend that's true at the federal level as well," said Senate Majority Leader Derek Schmidt, R-Independence, who voted for the bill. "It's the democratization of the legislative process."

Passage of the gambling bill turned a session known mostly for low productivity into one likely to be memorable.

Large, casino-and-hotel complexes will be permitted in Ford County, Wyandotte County, either Cherokee or Crawford county and either Sedgwick or Sumner county. The Wichita Greyhound Park, the Woodlands in Kansas City and the now-closed Camptown Greyhound Park in Frontenac, will share 2,200 slots at first, then get another 600 once the state signs casino contracts with private developers.

The state will own and operate the casinos, though private companies will manage their day-to-day operations. Supporters believe the state eventually will realize \$200 million a year in revenues.

Opponents predict the state also will lose restaurants and entertainment businesses, see bankruptcies spike, have more gambling addicts and deal with more broken families.

"They didn't want the Legislature or people to understand what was in their bill," House Speaker Melvin Neufeld, R-Ingalls, an opponent, said of the bill's backers.

Gambling supporters, of course, argue with Neufeld's statement and point out that authorizing slots and casinos is hardly a new issue. Gambling promoters had been trying for 15 years, with no success - largely because their coalitions would fray, then unravel, as lawmakers hashed over details.

So how were they successful this year?

They truncated the legislative process.

The textbook process for passing legislation is lengthy and repetitive, and in that process, committee chairmen and leaders are powerful. If they don't like bills, they can refuse to hold hearings or refuse to take votes.

But the power of leaders and chairmen has diminished over time. Bills are so often rewritten radically that there's a well-worn term for it - "gut and go." If a chairman refuses to take a vote, a bill's supporters often amend it during House and Senate debate into something else.

This year, gambling supporters concentrating on finding exactly what would pass and getting it into print. They were confident the House Federal and State Affairs Committee, whose members Neufeld appointed, would not be sympathetic, so they wanted to get around it, and they did.

"We had no other choice," said Rep. L. Candy Ruff, D-Leavenworth, a supporter.

Schmidt said such determination can be driven by groups building pressure on legislators back home. Constituents, he said, are less likely than they used to be to accept the notion that a bill couldn't pass simply because it got stuck in the legislative process.

Furthermore, many Kansans have been voting on gambling with their cars and wallets, traveling to Indian casinos in northeast Kansas and Oklahoma, or casinos in Missouri.

"Everywhere I go - the gas station, grocery store, even the church - little old ladies are coming up to me, 'When are we going to get a casino?'" said Rep. Tom Sawyer, D-Wichita, who supported the bill.

In January, the Senate passed a bill extending the Kansas Lottery, something necessary to keep ticket sales going past June 30. After a threat from supporters to force a debate on casinos and slots, the House Federal and State Affairs Committee endorsed the lottery bill on March 21.

Legislators on both sides of the debate knew the lottery bill was a vehicle, something that could become a casino-and-slots bill. There was a link, with the new gambling owned and operated by the lottery.

The House amended the bill on March 22 and gave it first-round approval before dawn on March 23, a Friday. The following Monday, the House passed the bill and returned it to the Senate.

Though it was radically different, senators didn't have to send it through committee. They could demand negotiations or take the even quicker step of voting to accept the House's changes and

send the bill to the governor. They did the latter Thursday, just after midnight.

And gambling supporters made a point, whether they intended to or not. They showed that the Legislature's rules are flexible enough to allow a group to move a bill around key leaders and to the governor's desk - and to do it with stunning speed.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Political Writer John Hanna has covered state government and politics since 1987.

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