Lafayette step closer to gambling

By Mike Hasten
State Editor

BATON ROUGE — Lafayette has moved one giant step closer to having dockside riverboat gambling on the Vermilion River and it would be difficult for opponents to stop it.

The House Committee on Criminal Justice, chaired by Rep. Raymond “LaLa” Lalonde of Carencro, on Thursday approved a Senate-passed bill that adds the Vermilion and Sabine rivers to the list of waterways that can have riverboat gambling. The panel amended the bill so it allows dockside gambling in eight specific areas — Lafayette, Bossier, Caddo, Desoto, East Carroll, Natchitoches, Ouachita and Sabine parishes.

But the panel also approved an amendment that makes it tougher — if not virtually impossible — for opponents to block dockside gambling if the full House approves the bill as written.

The bill has a clause that allows opponents to challenge dockside gambling if 25 percent of the registered voters in the parish don’t want it. Such an election could be held no later than Aug. 31, 1993 — a year earlier than was approved by the Senate.

The problem arises that the bill — if approved by the House as it now stands — does not become effective until Aug. 15, so any petition begun prior to that date would not be legal.

And even if 25 percent of the parish’s registered voters signed such a petition after the bill was enacted, Deputy Secretary of State Wade Martin Jr. says there’s no way to call an election that quickly. Ballot proposals must be submitted at least six weeks prior to an election and no elections are scheduled in August anyway.

Special elections require approval of the State Bond Commission, which meets only once a month, so it would take two to three months to schedule such an election, which would have to be paid for by parish government.

The committee also approved an amendment increasing the number of available permits from 15 to 25. Riverboat Gaming Commission Chairman Ken Pickering said the existing 15 permits are virtually awarded and the commission has 44 applications pending.

Pickering also told the committee “gaming has become gaming. Gaming is no longer a sinister business controlled by mobs. Gaming is run by corporate America and has evolved into a form of entertainment. Riverboat gaming makes up another factor in the tourist entertainment package that a community can offer.”

He also pointed out the economic benefits to a city in the form of jobs, taxes and tourism.

City Councilwoman Helen Bellamy told the committee that proponents of the measure “have not been authorized by the governing body of the parish or the city of Lafayette to take those positions. The City Council has taken no position.”

Bellamy said the election provision “is absurd” because of the deadline provision. “It’s impossible. It’s insulting.”

Sterling Lejeune, representing the city administration Bowen, said “the executive branch of the city of Lafayette supports this measure. We see it as a way of being able to effectively compete for the tourist dollar if other tourist destinations in Acadiana are going to have riverboat gaming.

“Obviously, the Vermilion River is not safe navigating it,” Lejeune said, “so dockside would be our only alternative. We would be on a level playing field for being able to compete for the tourist dollars.”

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