Gov. Buddy Roemer on Thursday cleared the way for riverboat gambling on Louisiana's major waterways, putting his signature on legislation that he and others claim will bring an economic boon to the state.

"Now we can clearly compete with Mississippi, Iowa and Illinois," said Roemer, mentioning the three other states that have already approved such a gambling venture.

Only Iowa has paddle wheel gambling already afloat. "This law is about increasing tourism, boosting economic development and growing jobs. It will keep us competitive with other states, particularly our neighbor Mississippi, where riverboat gambling has been approved for a year," he said.

In other action, Roemer also signed into law legislation giving charitable organizations the authority to conduct "casino night" or "Las Vegas night" as fund-raising events.

The charitable organizations have traditionally relied on bingo games for their fund-raising activities.

Meanwhile, Roemer said a decision is probably a week away on legislation legalizing video draw poker machines in bars, restaurants and other establishments.

"That is a more difficult decision to make than riverboat gambling," Roemer said.

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The morning Advocate
July 19, 1991
Page 1A
Column 3-5

See ROEMER, Page 6A
Roemer

CONTINUED FROM 1A

Roemer said he is satisfied that the riverboat gambling legislation he signed into law, HB1999, has all the necessary safeguards.

"It is a tight, good bill," he said.

Roemer said he does not like one provision in the law, but it was not of a sufficiently critical nature for him to veto the bill.

The provision involves a requirement that at least 25 percent of high alcoholic content beverages dispensed aboard ship be bottled in Louisiana.

He said proponents have agreed to support elimination of the provision next year.

Roemer's approval of the paddle wheel gaming bill came as no surprise. He said last year he was looking favorably on the idea because it is an easier form of gambling to supervise and it would put Louisiana on a competitive level with Mississippi.

Under the new law, floating casinos could operate on the Mississippi, Red, Calcasieu, Ouachita, Mermentau and Atchafalaya rivers, plus Lake Pontchartrain, Lake Maurepas, Bayou Bienvenu, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet and the Intracoastal Waterway.

The law limits to 15 the number of paddle wheel gambling vessels that can operate in the state.

Before approving the legislation, the Legislature took out all preferences — including one for owners of paddlewheel boats now plying the Mississippi River.

Proponents have said the marketplace will determine where the floating casinos will operate.

Charles Tapp, representing the Louisiana Rivers Development Council, said he expects six or seven vessels to operate out of Louisiana cities, with most having a New Orleans base.

There is a local option provision in the law, but localities must hold elections no later than March 15, 1992, to decide if they will prohibit riverboat casinos to dock in their jurisdictions.

In order to call an election on the issue, 25 percent of the registered voters in a municipality or parish would have to sign a petition seeking an election.