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From Tuesday's Sun

Slots ballot wording is decried

Opponents assert that it is crafted to get more votes

By Laura Smitherman

Sun reporter

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Opponents of slot machines in Maryland decried the wording of a ballot question to legalize expanded gambling Monday, saying it was crafted to garner more votes.

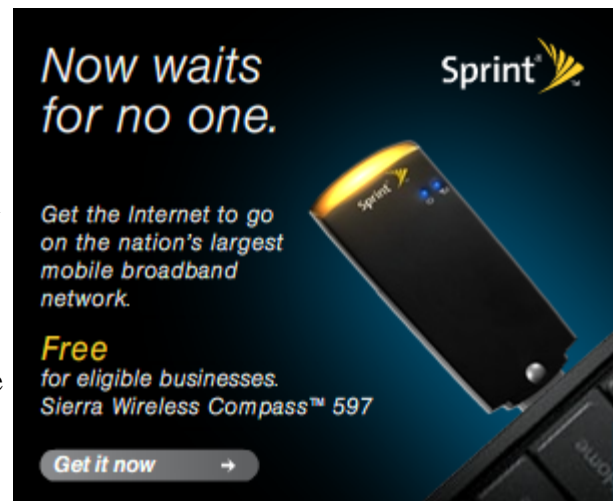
Maryland Secretary of State John P. McDonough drafted the question that will be on ballots in the November election, when voters will decide whether to amend the state constitution to allow slots at five locations across the state. McDonough, who was named to the post last month, insisted that he merely condensed language in the proposed constitutional amendment as passed by the General Assembly last year.

But anti-slots campaigns contend the ballot question is designed to influence voters because it discusses at length the ways in which the money raised from slots would fund public school education from pre-kindergarten through high school, as well as school construction and capital projects at higher education institutions. The ballot question does not mention the money going to gambling interests or to support the horse racing industry.

"It's troubling, and we think a serious look needs to be taken," said Scott Arceneaux, a senior adviser to Marylanders United to Stop Slots, a ballot committee. "It goes to great pains to list all the things it's going to fund that they obviously know voters will support. But it doesn't talk about the half-billion dollars going to the gambling industry or horse racing."

Arceneaux said his group is contemplating whether to file a legal challenge to the ballot question.

Slots foes have sounded alarms since McDonough's appointment, noting that he worked as a lawyer and lobbyist for Rosecroft Raceway in Prince George's County for two decades until 2006. Rosecroft is not one of the locations where a slots parlor is proposed, but the horse-racing track would benefit from a pool of about \$95 million a year that's expected to supplement purse subsidies and up to \$320 million over eight years to improve racetracks.



According to a fiscal analysis of the proposal, slot-parlor licensees would get about \$450 million a year and state funding for education would get an annual boost of \$660 million a year. The proposal would authorize 15,000 slot machines divided among five locations in Baltimore City and Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Cecil and Worcester counties.

"When you make a gambling lobbyist secretary of state, you get language that is favorable to the gambling industry," said Aaron Meisner, leader of the grass-roots group Stop Slots Maryland. "It's outrageous, but what do we really expect?."

McDonough, who consulted with John T. Willis, a professor at the University of Baltimore and a former Maryland secretary of state, said he is satisfied that the ballot question is fair "without arguing for or against it."

McDonough said his job is to adhere to the constitutional amendment, which mentions only the education funding. The other ways in which slots revenue would be divided among licensees, the horse-racing industry and other purposes are laid out in separate legislation that governs how the slots program would work if approved by voters. Monday was the deadline for him to draft the language.

He added that the only "significant deviation" he made was to include the word "slot machines" in the title of the ballot question. The constitutional amendment, as passed by the legislature, only refers to "video lottery terminals," a technical term that he said the average voter might not understand.

Slots proponents said the fact that slots would fund education is important for voters to understand. Clara Floyd, president of the Maryland State Teachers Association, which backs slots, said Monday that "passage of the referendum will help us meet the many unmet needs of our students." She said that failure of the referendum would lead to larger class sizes and outdated facilities and textbooks.

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