

Illinois may still bet on slot machines at horse tracks

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BY KEVIN McDERMOTT

UPDATE, 1:20 p.m.: State Comptroller Judy Baar Topinka, a Republican and the state's chief fiscal officer, came out today with a statement supporting the slots-at-the-tracks proposal, and also supporting an increase in the state's cigarette tax. She said the state's \$8.5 billion backlog of unpaid bills makes it necessary.

From the statement: "I am not inclined to support any tax or fee increases, but can back the cigarette tax provided that critical spending cuts are made and much-needed support of the horse racing industry is passed. Our biggest problem in this state is spending, and that has to be addressed. But the reality is that increased revenue also has to be a part of balancing the budget, and this compromise accomplishes that as well."

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. • Are "slots at the tracks" back in play in Illinois?

The on-again, off-again proposal to allow Illinois horseracing tracks to host slot machines may be under discussion in state budget negotiations. Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn has been a hardcore opponent of the idea, and he still hasn't endorsed it. But during one closed-door meeting with legislative leaders this week, he reportedly declined to reiterate his earlier entrenched opposition.

Capitol Fax, a Springfield political newsletter, reported on the meeting this morning, citing unnamed sources. We asked the Administration to knock it down, and they wouldn't. In an emailed response, Quinn's office called the slots proposal a "distraction"—but didn't reiterate the flat-out opposition (and veto threat) that Quinn has previously expressed on the issue.

We asked a second time if Quinn is still completely opposed, and got the same non-answer. "We're hearing the same rumors," said Tony Somone, executive director of the Illinois Harness Horsemen's Association. "We're cautiously optimistic."

Fairmount Park in Collinsville is among those pushing the slots-at-the-tracks plan. It appeared

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headed for full passage through the Legislature last year but stalled after Quinn said he would veto it. “We have no interest in our state becoming the Las Vegas of the Midwest,” Quinn said at the time.

The state now faces another tough budget year, with unpaid bills, looming pension and Medicaid debts, and limited revenue options after having recently raised the state income tax. The slots proposal was presented as a way to rescue the struggling horseracing industry while providing a new revenue stream to the state, which would tax the slot profits.

The Legislature is scheduled to adjourn for the summer on May 31.