

# South Jersey legislators forced to aid horse racing before anything gets done in Atlantic City

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By JULIET FLETCHER Statehouse Bureau

Five months after Gov. Chris Christie called for an end to horse-racing subsidies in what racetrack advocates called a deal, the package of bills designed to bolster racing will face legislators Monday in the Assembly.

Consideration of key racing bills — allowing “exchange wagering” on races and forcing anyone holding an idle off-track wagering license to use it or lose it next year — signals that the revenue-boosting measures could be signed into law ahead of a contentious package that would transform the Atlantic City casino and tourism industries.

The chance that racing could have its immediate future secured before the gaming resort’s illustrates the influence New Jersey legislators over the drawn-out negotiating process involving bills to create a state-run Atlantic City tourism district and casino regulations. Key legislators, including state Sen. Paul Sarlo, D-Bergen, Essex, Passaic, and Assemblyman Ralph Caputo, D-Essex, forced southern legislators to put funding for horse racing front and center in the process that was meant to focus on Atlantic City.

As for orchestrating the timing of the bills’ passage, majority-party Democrats kept gaming and racing in lock step, despite the governor.

Governor ignored

Horse-racing advocates watching the bills’ accelerated arrival say they cannot help but have flashbacks to the summer when Christie announced a landmark switch in state policy toward the gaming and racing industries. Where horse-racing tracks were subsidized, Christie said state support for the sport could no longer continue.

At that point, leading advocates said they feared the worst.

“We knew the governor’s plan spelled disaster,” Tom Luchento, head of the Standardbred Breeders and Owners Association, said Thursday. “The question was, what could we do about it?”

The horsemen’s answer was to try to convince influential legislators not to leave racing behind.

In the intervening months, lawmakers from northern New Jersey have used their muscle to persuade their southern counterparts to something they had previously decried: a new, transitional three-year subsidy from casino revenue to horse purses.

Luchento estimates standardbred racing needs \$400,000 per racing day in purse revenue to run a 100-day season. The New Jersey S Exposition Authority estimates running the standardbred season at the Meadowlands racetrack costs \$52 million. A spokeswoman for thoroughbred industry did not return a request for comment, but Monmouth Park spent \$50 million this year on purses for 50 days of thoroughbred racing.

Christie said in July he wanted to see an end to a \$30 million annual subsidy from casinos to horse purses.

The horsemen had good reason to demand to know how much revenue they will have next year, said Assemblyman John Burzichelli, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland.

“They need to report purse conditions soon, to say how much they will be offering,” Burzichelli said.

“Forty million a year in purses is what we want,” Burzichelli said. “South Jersey legislators forced to aid horse racing before anything gets done in Atlantic City.”

how much money they need to operate.

Three-year subsidy

A three-year subsidy tied to savings from Atlantic City casino deregulation would give racing \$15 million next year, then \$10 mi

Whelan said he could stand that pace.

"The packages are traveling concurrently," he said. "Fairly concurrently."

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