

Carl Golden

Implicit in Sweeney's criticism was his concern that his authority as Senate president faced a serious challenge from those who demanded speedy action to approve the amendment for ballot placement this November.

Sweeney's position has been that the 2016 election would be more favorable because the presidential contest would produce a far greater voter turnout than this year when Assembly candidates lead the ticket.

Essex County Sen. Dick Codey, whose history with Sweeney has been frosty ever since Sweeney defeated him in a contest for Senate president, posited the theory that the scrum referred to and the turmoil over where and how many casinos would be approved was contrived, a plot concocted by South Jersey interests to create such confusion and uncertainty that the proposed amendment would be rejected by voters.

Codey seemed to be suggesting that Sweeney sought to be perceived as amenable to casino development in North Jersey while, at the same time, raising enough questions to defeat the amendment and protect the interests of Atlantic City and South Jersey.

Proponents of acting this year argue that any delay would place the state at a serious competitive disadvantage, providing New York in particular an opportunity to move ahead with casino development in the metropolitan region, luring gamblers from the populous North Jersey market while continuing to cede an edge to casinos operating within an hour's drive in Pennsylvania.

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They are suspicious of Sweeney's motives for delaying the referendum, contending there is no evidence a higher voter turnout will be the determining factor in winning approval and that the state should demonstrate clearly its commitment to casino expansion by moving as quickly as possible.

If, they say, the referendum is

A year's delay would certainly give opponents ample time to organize, mobilize, and raise money to carry on a campaign aimed at rejecting the proposal. With sufficient financial backing, opposition forces could achieve equal footing with supporters, putting the outcome in question.

History suggests a clear ambivalence among New Jerseyans over whether and where to permit casino gambling, defeating an amendment in 1974 by more than 400,000 votes, but approving it by a nearly identical margin two years later if it was confined to Atlantic City.

Granted, times have changed and gambling has become such an accepted part of everyday life that opposition is no longer as deep-seated as it was 40 years ago.

However, the divisions it has exposed in the Democratic Party and the longer-term impact -- including on the 2017 governor's contest -- will achieve as much importance, interest, and debate as the proposal itself.

Carl Golden served as press secretary for Republican Gov. Thomas Kean for eight years and as communications director for Republican Gov. Christie Whitman for three years. He is currently a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

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