

Reforming N.J. gaming industry will challenge Christie

BY CARL GOLDEN

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COMMENTARY

As political debates go, the one shaping up over the Christie Administration's comprehensive initiative to reform and reinvigorate the state's gaming and entertainment industries threatens to become the most prolonged and divisive struggle since the fight over enactment of the state's first income tax in the mid-70's.

legislators that the Governor was callously suggesting the death of racing at an enormous economic cost.

South Jersey legislators were pleased at the focus on Atlantic City and, in particular, rejecting VLT placement. Opposition to VLTs and racinos has been a galvanizing, bipartisan issue for them.

The recent gaming summit in Atlantic City — criticized because it consisted exclusively of Democratic legislators — billed as a response to the Administration plan rather than a serious effort to produce an alternative — highlighted a partisan divide but revealed a serious internal party rift between north and south.

Understandably, the confrontation over whether horse racing should be rescued has emerged as the central point of contention, raising again the question of whether the state belongs in the business at all.

Declining attendance and revenues at the tracks show no signs of ending or reversing, despite numerous proposals, including millions of dollars in state subsidies, many more millions in casino industry support, off track betting and other measures.

It is time, the Christie Administration has concluded, to admit the industry's time has passed. The only alternative is the difficult decision to end it.

On this issue, Senate President Steve Sweeney of Gloucester County has locked himself into a seeming position. He's an adamant opponent of racinos and continued casino industry subsidies, but to placate North Jersey legislators he said the state must discover some way to maintain the racing industry. Without taxpayer subsidies, though, the Christie Administration would surely oppose — it's difficult to envision how a rescue could be carried out.

casino-centric venue with secondary attractions and amusements? Both approaches have their adherents and it will not be a simple task to arrive at a consensus.

The Christie Administration deserves credit for taking on in a holistic fashion an assessment of the state's role in the sports and entertainment industry, rather than develop piecemeal responses as crises arise or work along the margins without any larger goal in view.

It is an approach fraught with political controversy and pitfalls as each of the many interest groups with a stake in the outcome exert pressure on the Legislature in their quest for favorable treatment.

If he succeeds in realizing his agenda, Christie will have achieved a political victory the equivalent of that attained by Gov. William Cahill with the creation of the Meadowlands complex nearly 40 years ago — the same entity which would be effectively dissolved under the Christie plan.

Ironies abound.

***Carl Golden** is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College.*

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