

# Rendell OKs free drinks in casinos

Harrisburg – Gov. Ed Rendell said yes yesterday to providing free liquor for slots gamblers at Pennsylvania casinos, but no to expanding gaming to include table games like poker and blackjack.

Mr. Rendell said he'll sign a proposal, approved by the Legislature just before it recessed last week, to allow Pennsylvania casinos to offer unlimited free drinks to people playing slot machines from 7 a.m. to 2 a.m. daily.

He said the state Gaming Control Board will issue regulations controlling how such free liquor is doled out – perhaps limiting gamblers to one drink an hour – and reinforcing a current ban on serving intoxicated persons.

The board „will place into the casino licensing agreements some control mechanisms for [serving liquor],“ he said. „We will have significant regulations in Pennsylvania.“

Mr. Rendell agreed with legislators who approved the free liquor measure that such a thing is not unusual in casinos.

„Virtually every gaming operation around the world has this amenity,“ he said at a news conference.

Despite what some skeptics think, Mr. Rendell said, casinos do not „want people to get falling down, sloppy drunk so they will lose more money. That isn't the case.“

Serving an already intoxicated person would jeopardize a casino's liquor license, and possibly its gaming license, some legislators have said.

Mr. Rendell disagreed with critics of the Legislature who complained that not enough public attention was given to the

free liquor bill before it was passed late on the night of Nov. 21.

„This was not an issue that was slammed through at the last moment,“ he said. He said it was debated „long and hard“ in 2004 before the original slots bill was passed in July of that year.

Mr. Rendell said it is „way, way premature“ to talk about House Democratic leader H. William DeWeese’s plan to expand gambling options to include poker, blackjack and perhaps dice.

Mr. DeWeese has talked for months about allowing Pennsylvania casinos to have table games, but his proposal may gain steam now that it looks like he’ll be House speaker starting Jan. 2.

A bill is in the works to legalize table games, DeWeese spokesman Tom Andrews said yesterday, but „the details are still being worked out.“

„It’s a concept that [Mr. DeWeese] supports, but it’s not a House Democratic initiative,“ Mr. Andrews said. „It would be a way to further reduce property taxes by raising additional revenue through gaming.“

Mr. Rendell and several senators yesterday poured cold water on the idea.

„We have to make sure that what we’ve done with [slots gaming] is successful, works well and that we can control whatever negative sides there are to it,“ said the governor, who had pushed for enactment of Act 71, the law that will bring 14 casinos to the state.

„Until we’ve had a significant test period to see [the current law] in operation, I don’t think that any [expansion] bills should be considered,“ Mr. Rendell said. He defined the necessary test period as „probably at least two or three years“ after the 14 casinos are up and running, which likely

will take until 2008.

That means table games „probably won't happen during my watch," he said, meaning before he leaves office in January 2011.

Other opposition to having table games at Pennsylvania casinos came from Sen. Joseph Scarnati, the new president pro tem, Sen. Jane Orie, R-McCandless, and Sen. Sean Logan, D-Monroeville.

„We haven't even gotten the slots up and running," said Mr. Scarnati, R-Jefferson. „We need to take a step back, take a deep breath and see how [slots casinos] work out."

„I don't believe there is any support in the Senate for doing that," said Ms. Orie. „This [table games bill] is a routine that [Mr. DeWeese] does every year."

Adding table games would not pose a problem for the three applicants for Pittsburgh's casino license – Forest City Enterprises, Isle of Capri Casinos Inc. and PITG Gaming LLC.

PITG spokesman Bob Oltmanns said there would be „ample room" in the proposed two-story casino on the North Shore.

Representatives for Isle of Capri and Forest City also said their casinos – in the Hill District and Station Square, respectively – would be large enough to add table games, should they be legalized.