

TDN Q&A

TDN Q&A: DAMON THAYER

On Tuesday, Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear, a Democrat, joined with Republican state senator Damon Thayer to put forth a bill in the Kentucky Senate to get the issue of expanded gambling on the ballot for the November elections. The bill, which would give voters the right to amend the state constitution, must pass both chambers of the Kentucky legislature by a 60% super majority. Kentuckians have debated the pros and cons of expanded gaming for nearly two decades, and proponents argue that the best path forward is to let Kentucky voters themselves make the decision. But it's not as simple as that. Assorted groups have lined up against the bill, and getting the measure to the floor of the Senate--much less on the ballot--is far from a slam dunk. Among the opponents is Senate President David Williams, who last November was soundly defeated by Beshear in a failed gubernatorial run but who has considerable clout in Frankfort. Yesterday, the *TDN's* Lucas Marquardt talked with Thayer about Senate procedure, and what observers can expect in the coming weeks and months.



Damon Thayer

The bill has been introduced to the Senate--now what happens now? Right now, the bill has been assigned to the State and Local Government Committee, of which I'm the chairman. Our regularly scheduled meeting is Wednesdays at noon, and it's my plan to bring the bill up at that time [next week]. If it has the necessary number of votes to pass out of committee (six of the committee's 11 votes), it goes into the hands of the Rules Committee, which is chaired by David Williams. It's my hope that it will then be given the opportunity to go to the floor of the Senate for a full vote.

So once it's out of your committee, it doesn't automatically go to the floor? No. It will be reported that it has passed out of the Rules Committee, but it has to have three readings, so it would be at least two more days before it could go to the floor under the rules of the Senate. And it would have to be posted in the Orders of the Day by the Rules Committee.

Are you confident it will get to the floor, and if so, do you think you have the votes to make the ballot in November? I'm hopeful it will get to the floor. And I think it could go either way. Remember, if it does pass the Senate, it still has to pass the House. I think it's close right now. I know the governor is meeting with members of the Senate and trying to convince them to vote for the bill.

Without getting too far ahead of ourselves, what happens if the referendum makes the ballot and it is passed? If it gets on the ballot in November and voters pass it, it requires just a simple majority--50% plus one. But then the General Assembly would have to come back into session and pass enabling legislation to set up the structure of how it's governed, regulated, etc., and that is something that could be handled a year from now.

Is it fair to say that even if it did pass in November, that enabling legislation could be another hurdle? It would be a major hurdle and very controversial. Everybody would want something. But we're a long ways away from that.

What's the time frame for us finding out whether or not the measure will make the ballot? The General Assembly has to adjourn by midnight on Apr. 15, so sometime between now and then.

The bill obviously enjoys huge support from the Kentucky horse industry. What would you say to people who want to get involved and help the bill get passed? I would encourage them to call their state representative and their state senator and urge them to support the bill, if they feel strongly about it.

Last week, you released the client list for your private consulting firm, which includes several Bluegrass farms. Why did you do it, and what has the response been? First of all, I have now disclosed more information than any member of the General Assembly. I have disclosed more than is required by law, and I wasn't required by law to disclose my clients. But I felt it was the right thing to do. During my career in the General Assembly, I've been an advocate for disclosure. I have nothing to hide. I don't have that many clients right now, and the majority of my work is outside the horse industry. The response has been mostly positive, aside from those who are against the bill. Some of them want to make it a personal attack on me instead of debating the pros and cons of the legislation. But this has been my consistent position all along: that the way to deal with the expanded gambling issue is by letting the people decide. I haven't wavered on that, and I feel like this was the right time to move forward on the initiative and to work with the governor in a bipartisan manner and give the people what they want--a change to vote on expanded gambling.

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