

STATE HOUSE

NEWS SERVICE

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Subject: ONLINE POKER AMENDMENT SPARKS WORDS BETWEEN GROSSMAN,
WINSLOW

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By Kyle Cheney
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, SEPT. 9, 2011.....A Republican lawmaker's plan to explore the introduction of internet poker in Massachusetts provoked a fierce rejection Friday from Treasurer Steven Grossman, who called the plan "reckless and irresponsible," as well as a violation of federal law.

"I did not want to let it go even one news cycle without expressing how strongly I feel about the recklessness and irresponsibility," Grossman told the News Service in a phone interview just hours after the proposal was unveiled.

The plan, an amendment to expanded gambling legislation filed just before a 3 p.m. deadline by Rep. Daniel Winslow (R-Norfolk), would charge a gambling commission with developing legislation to sanction up to five internet poker operations. The commission would be charged with drafting regulations to oversee the online poker industry, including provisions to restrict players from jurisdictions where online poker is banned and to ensure that online operations comport with federal law.

The amendment calls on the gaming commission to, by July 1, 2012, analyze and prepare model legislation and regulations that achieve certain minimum requirements. The proposal would then be subject to a public legislative hearing.

The sudden sparring between Grossman, a former state and national Democratic Party chairman, and Winslow, former legal counsel and campaign adviser to Gov. Mitt Romney and U.S. Sen. Scott Brown, features two veteran political operatives who are both in their first terms in state offices. Both have been eyed by colleagues as potential candidates for higher office – Grossman has previously run for governor.

Grossman – who as treasurer oversees the state Lottery – relentlessly panned Winslow’s plan, taking exception to its filing on Friday afternoon and contending that Winslow never attempted to contact him or any other gaming leader in Massachusetts, and he suggested that Winslow’s plan would undercut the value of three casino licenses that would be put out to bid in under pending gaming legislation.

“To toss five licenses in on a Friday afternoon at 3 o’ clock that perhaps will be discussed next week without prior discussion with anybody in the commonwealth that I know of who plays a leadership role in the gaming process ... seems to me to be both reckless and irresponsible,” Grossman said. “What I’m not open to is grandstanding by members of the Legislature who without any prior consultation decide they’re going to do something ... whether it undermines the value of casino licenses or not.”

Winslow, in a phone interview, forcefully rejected Grossman’s concerns, arguing that his amendment – one of 154 filed by lawmakers by Friday afternoon’s deadline – was carefully crafted to “ensure integrity, prevent fraud and create high-tech jobs and increase revenue for Massachusetts.”

“It’s the exact opposite of recklessness,” Winslow said.

Winslow argued federal law bars “games of chance” from being played online but that “games of skill” – like poker – could be legalized. His proposal instructs the commission that would be created through the expanded gambling bill to ensure that online poker operators treat their offerings as skill games.

Winslow said his plan would also safeguard against users who attempt to play poker from jurisdictions in which internet poker is banned.

“Those provisions were added precisely because of the federal law,” he said.

“If the Democrats don’t like last-minute amendments to their secret bills, maybe they ought to have the process be more open and transparent in the first place,” Winslow added, alluding to the closed-door talks among Gov. Deval Patrick, Senate President Therese Murray and House Speaker Robert DeLeo to establish the framework of expanded gambling legislation.

“It seems somewhat hypocritical, the Democrats complaining about the lack of consultation when this process was held entirely behind closed doors, excluding all but the top-level Democrats. Spare me complaints about process. We’re doing the very best we can with very limited access we have.”

Debate on Winslow’s amendment could occur as early as next Wednesday, when the House is expected to take up an expanded gambling bill. That bill would sanction the licensing of three casinos and a slot machine venue -- all competitively bid – in Massachusetts.

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