

State gets to work on implementing slots

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More than a month after Maryland voters approved a measure allowing 15,000 slot machines to be opened at five locations, the committee charged with awarding the slots licenses is starting to come together.

The seven-member group will award the licenses through sealed competitive bidding and will be responsible for selecting facilities in Allegany, Anne Arundel, Cecil and Worcester counties and Baltimore, according to a press release from the governor's office.

After years of state lawmakers battling in Annapolis, the issue was settled with 60 percent of voters statewide casting a ballot in favor of amending the state's constitution to allow slots.

In the months leading up to the referendum, both sides campaigned heavily throughout the state. The pro-slots camp received hefty donations from the gambling and horse racing industries while the anti-slots group relied on grassroots tactics and smaller donations by more people.

Supporters of the referendum presented voters with hard choices: approve slot machines, raise taxes or cut services.

Opponents argued that the referendum was part of what was already the largest tax hike in the state's history, with the increase in the state's sales and cigarette taxes among other measures passed in the 2007 special session. They also

argued the social costs will outweigh any revenues that the state will receive.

With the question settled, the implementation of slots begins and the first step is

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setting up the committee that will award the licenses to operate video lottery terminals in Maryland.

Earlier this month, Gov. Martin O'Malley appointed Donald C. Fry as chairman of the Video Lottery Facility Location Commission. Fry is the president and chief executive officer of the Greater Baltimore Committee, a group made up of civic and business leaders, and a former state lawmaker who served in the House of Delegates and the Senate representing Cecil and Harford counties, according to a press release from the governor.

Linda Read of Cecil County, a corporate secretary and treasure for commercial builder Paul Risk Associates Inc., and Ella Pierce of Baltimore, who serves on the State Board of Public Accountancy, were also appointed by the governor in early December.

The four remaining members of the commission were appointed by Senate President Thomas V. "Mike" Miller Jr. and Speaker Michael Busch.

Busch, D-Anne Arundel, appointed Thomas Barbera, who recently retired as regional chief executive officer of UnitedHealthcare's

mid-Atlantic region. Barbera started his career as a Maryland assistant attorney general.

D. Bruce Poole, a Washington County attorney and former state delegate, was also appointed by Busch. Poole served on the State Ethics Commission from 2000-04.

"They each bring an independent voice and an ability to balance private and public sector needs to ensure a fair and transparent process for the State of Maryland," Busch said in a press release.

Miller, D-Prince George's, appointed retired Prince George's County Circuit Court Judge James H. Taylor and Robert Neall, a former state senator and Anne Arundel county executive, to the commission.

"After the voters overwhelming decided in favor of a state video lottery terminal program, it is my great honor to appoint two very prominent individuals who will ensure that the state now obtains the most revenue possible through the competitive bidding process established by law," Miller said in a press release.

An expanded Maryland Lottery Commission with nine members will provide the oversight for the operation of slots in the state. O'Malley appointed four additional people to the commission in early December, according to a press release.

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