

Atlantic City Oversight Stirs Senate Seat Showdown

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A sports betting referendum may not be the only important gambling issue on the ballot when New Jersey voters go to the polls on November 8.

Atlantic City Mayor Lorenzo Langford is seriously considering running as an independent against former Atlantic City Mayor Jim Whelan, who is chairman of the state senate committee overseeing New Jersey's gambling industry. Both men are Democrats.

"He is a Benedict Arnold, a Judas, a traitor and a turncoat," Langford said of Whelan.

Langford claims Whelan committed "an act of treason" against Atlantic City when he sponsored S11, a bill signed into law this year by Republican Governor Chris Christie that [turned over control of the city's casino district to the state government](#).

The bill was part of Republican Governor Christie's plan to revitalize Atlantic City, elements of which Whelan supported and actively advanced.

"His overblown rhetoric is not going to solve Atlantic City's underlying problem," Whelan said. "Atlantic City is in a slide, and has been for quite awhile. I'm not an advocate of doing nothing."

In his role as chairman of the Senate Committee on Government, Wagering, Tourism and Historic Preservation, Whelan crafted S11 alongside legislation to [allow boutique casinos](#) in New Jersey and reduce gaming regulation.

"I think the combination of S11 and the [deregulation bill](#) showed a real commitment by the state to Atlantic City that we had not seen before, and I think it helped attract capital to finish Revel," Whelan said in reference to the casino project scheduled to open May 15, 2012."

"Without that, I think Revel would be a half- finished monument to futility," he said.

Atlantic City has seen casino revenues decline for the past three years as regional competition and then the recession hit the once buoyant East Coast gaming Mecca hard.

Speaking to analysts yesterday, Tim Wilmott, president and chief operating officer of Penn National Gaming, said Revel's opening will help, but the Atlantic City casino market is still likely to contract "over the next couple of years."

"There's still product there that is dated and needs to go out of the market," Wilmott said.

Even if Whelan is defeated in November, Democrats have a good shot at retaining control of the New Jersey Senate.

But any new chairman of the committee overseeing gaming is unlikely to be as active on casino legislation impacting Atlantic City, according to Barbara DeMarco, a New Jersey racing lobbyist whose clients include Betfair.

"The new Democratic chairman will not be as closely tied to Atlantic City as Whelan, given Jim's longstanding ties to the city," DeMarco said.

Langford said he plans to decide by Labor Day weekend (September 3-5) whether to challenge Whelan.

"I'm going to vet the issues and crunch the numbers before I make a final decision," he said.

After losing his first two bids to unseat Whelan as mayor, Langford succeeded in 2001. "The third time was the charm," he said.

Republican Assemblyman Vincent Polistina already is challenging Whelan in his bid for a third term in the New Jersey Senate. Whelan has charged Langford and Polistina of working together to defeat him. "I don't think anyone believes Langford can win this race, so he's running to draw votes from my base in Atlantic

City,” Whelan said.

But Langford vehemently denies he plans to run as a spoiler. “I’m in it to win it,” Langford said. “If I run, I would give it my full attention.”

Langford would have to resign as mayor if he wins in November because of a New Jersey law barring politicians from holding two elected offices.

No matter who wins, there are some who believe Langford, Polistina or Whelan would prove a strong advocate of Atlantic City’s casino industry in the New Jersey Senate.

“Legislative representatives from Atlantic City have a good record on gaming issues,” said Daniel Douglas, executive director of public policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.