

New Jersey's Online Advocates Await Sports Betting Vote

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While many observers see New Jersey's November referendum on legalized sports betting as a symbolic vote due to pre-existing federal law, it is still likely to set a strong precedent for whether a similar effort on Internet gaming could be successful in 2012.

After the veto of a bill that would have legalized Internet gambling in New Jersey, advocates of intrastate online wagering are shifting their focus to 2012 and a referendum.

New Jersey voters already are set to vote on a referendum this November to legalize sports betting, and polling suggests it has a good chance of passing.

Internet gambling advocates are hoping to capitalize on the momentum of a successful referendum on sports betting to pass an online wagering referendum in 2012.

But while [sports betting is supported by 62 percent of New Jersey voters, only 26 percent are likely to vote for Internet gambling](#), according to a poll conducted in February by Public Mind, an opinion research center at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

"If the sports betting referendum fails in November, I think it will not bode well for an Internet gambling referendum in 2012," said Barbara DeMarco, a New Jersey lobbyist for clients including Betfair/ TVG.

The sports betting referendum would allow wagers at casinos in Atlantic City and at racetracks in New Jersey on football, basketball, horse races and other sporting events.

But sports leagues including the NFL are adamantly opposed to sports betting, which it considers a threat to the integrity of its games.

"I have no doubt that the NFL and other major sports leagues will campaign aggressively to get out the vote against the sports betting referendum in New Jersey," said James Wortman, a former Atlantic City gaming executive who is director of the Office of Gaming Education and Research at the University of Houston.

Even if New Jersey voters pass the sports betting referendum, it is not clear when wagering will be allowed in casinos and at tracks.

Any successful vote would still have to overcome [the 1992 Professional Amateur Sports Protection Act which prohibited sports betting](#) in every state except Nevada. Sports lotteries in Delaware, Montana and Oregon were also exempted.

Congress gave New Jersey one year to pass legislation allowing sports betting, but nothing happened.

"I think the federal government will go to court to stop sports betting in New Jersey if the referendum passes," Wortman said.

Still, that is not stopping Raymond Lesniak, a Democratic state senator from New Jersey who has led efforts to legalize sports betting and Internet gambling in New Jersey.

Shortly after Republican [Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey vetoed his Internet gambling bill](#) in March, Lesniak vowed to re-introduce a new version.

After the governor made it clear he would not accept a revised version of his bill, Lesniak decided to move forward with plans for a referendum.

John Burzichelli, a Democratic assemblyman and a Lesniak ally, told gambling executives last month in Atlantic City to expect an Internet gambling referendum on the ballot in November 2012.

"We came very close, and we're going to take another run at it," Burzichelli said.

Sources say Lesniak and Burzichelli now plan to wait until after the sports betting referendum passes in November to ask the New Jersey legislature to put an Internet gambling referendum on the ballot in 2012.

But a win on sports wagering still might not read across to support of online gambling, believes Israel Posner, executive director of the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism at Richard Stockton College in Atlantic City.

"I would imagine that the number of voters interested in sports wagering is much smaller than the number of voters who might want to gamble online," Posner said. "There could be very different outcomes."

Joseph Kelly, a gambling policy expert and professor of business law at Buffalo State College in New York, also believes voters could still take different views on sports betting and online wagering.

"They're apples and oranges," Kelly said.