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Teachers vote to remain neutral; other organizations mull options

by Sean R. Sedam and Alan Brody | Staff Writers

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Large organizations are having as difficult a time with the issue of bringing slot machine gambling to Maryland as the General Assembly had in bringing the issue to the November ballot.

Earlier this month, the Montgomery County teachers union's Representative Assembly voted to remain neutral on the issue, breaking with the state teachers union, which announced earlier this year that it would support the referendum on the November ballot as a way to pay for schools.

The vote, by 85 percent of the union representatives from schools countywide, means that Montgomery union will not conduct any "institutionally sanctioned activities in support or opposition of the referendum," President Bonnie Cullison said.

"It was a very emotional discussion," Cullison said of the representatives' meeting. "There were a lot of strong feelings in opposition and a very strong feeling that the [state] teachers association should not have taken a position on it. But in the end, it is a decision that is very important to the people of Maryland and they should have an opportunity to decide it after getting all the information."

The vote prohibits the Montgomery union — the state's largest county teachers union, with 11,000 members — from organizing its members in support of a campaign that is expected to ramp up in the coming months.

Meanwhile, organizations formed as consensus builders are contemplating what role, if any, to take in a debate in which its member organizations are not unanimous.

The Committee for Frederick County was established 10 years ago as a way of building consensus among county leaders, nonprofit agencies, professional associations and businesses on issues important to Frederick County residents. On slots, the group isn't finding consensus, said Tom Lynch, the organization's chairman and a principal at Miles & Stockbridge in Frederick.

The nonpartisan committee could take a position in the future, but that would require an 85 percent approval of membership.

"I don't think in Frederick County you'll get 85 percent of any group of people to agree as to the advisability on something like slots," Lynch said.

Business and labor groups have come out in support of legalizing slots.

Three weeks ago, the Maryland Chamber of Commerce and the Maryland State and District of Columbia AFL-CIO each endorsed the referendum. The Maryland Association of Counties has also announced its support.

"The Maryland chamber understands that the local chambers are not necessarily on the same page," said Lynch, who serves on the boards of both the Frederick County and Maryland chambers of commerce. "Obviously there are much different interests in Frederick County and a much different constituency than the Maryland chamber as a whole."

Lynch expects to see strong opinions on both sides of the debate.

Slots supporters will see it as a way to address the school system's construction needs, Lynch said. Opponents will have moral and religious objections.

The Committee for Montgomery remains opposed to slot machine gambling and it "remains to be seen" what role the group will play in the debate over the November referendum on bringing slots to Maryland, Chairman Robert E. Jepson said.

The panel of 40 county business, education, labor, civic and community-based organizations has long opposed slots, a position that is unlikely to change before the November general election, said Jepson, associate vice president of government relations and public policy for Adventist HealthCare, which owns and operates two of Montgomery County's five hospitals.

"Recently the rationale has been that it's not good public policy to rely on slot machine gambling," he said.

There is also the "social cost" of gambling, Jepson said.

The group's executive committee and membership will decide before November on what role, if any, to play in the debate over the referendum.

The Frederick County Chamber of Commerce has not taken up the issue yet.

"Most businesses, if the alternative is higher taxes, would rather see the slots," said Joe Lebherz, who was president and CEO of the Frederick County Chamber from 1993 to 2004.

However, members are not a bloc, said Lebherz, now the director of institutional and government relations for Mount St. Mary's University. "They may be a business of one, five, 10 [employees]. Their own personal opinions came into play greatly, perhaps more than their business interest."

The issue has created unique partnerships and divisions, said Sean Dobson, executive director of Progressive Maryland, which has not taken a position yet.

"You're going to see normal allies working against each other and normal opponents in bed with each other on this issue," Dobson said.

Rifts created by slots are already evident among members of the Greater Baltimore Committee, said President and Chief Executive Officer Donald C. Fry.

"The one thing that has created unique coalitions this year is the fear of failure of this [referendum] and the inability to address the structural deficit," Fry said. "... The fact that it's a constitutional amendment is an issue with some members."

The Greater Washington Board of Trade has also not taken a position, but could do so at an executive meeting this week, spokeswoman Liz Levitan said.

The Prince George's County teachers union recently voted to remain neutral on the issue as well, Cullison said.

Montgomery County teachers are free to participate in the debate as individuals, Cullison said. But in light of MCEA's vote, Cullison plans to ask MSTA leaders to spend money only on educating members about the referendum and not to do any public outreach.

Diana Saquella, the state teachers union's chief lobbyist, downplayed the Montgomery union's vote, saying that its members will have voices on both sides of the debate.

"I think they were very respectful of the process," she said. "Maybe those building reps don't entirely agree with the [Montgomery union's] board, but they didn't vote to do anything other than to just be quiet themselves. They're not dictating to the rest of the state."

Slots opponents saw the Montgomery union's vote as a victory.

"Funding education should be a priority, not an afterthought — or a gamble — and Marylanders United to Stop Slots applauds the decision made last night by Montgomery County Teachers Association to refuse to support slots in Maryland," Scott Arceneaux, senior adviser to Marylanders United to Stop Slots, said in a statement.