

## Memorial not enough to kill coin drop bill

Publication: THE CHARLESTON DAILY MAIL  
Published: Saturday, March 06, 1999  
Page: P1A  
Byline: STACEY RUCKLE

DAILY MAIL CAPITOL REPORTER

Two years ago, Delegate Dick Henderson took the House floor and made a humorous, passionate speech about the pitfalls of changing video lottery games to be more like slot machines.

On Friday, the day House members memorialized Henderson's 1998 death, fellow Republicans invoked that speech in an unsuccessful attempt to defeat the very same bill.

"If Dick were here I think he would be very saddened by the thought this bill might pass," Delegate Steve Harrison, R-Kanawha, said before the 61-34 House vote to pass the so-called coin drop bill.

Delegate Rusty Webb, who is assigned to the desk where Henderson sat, held up notes Henderson had stashed in a drawer after making the 1997 speech that some said killed that year's coin drop bill.

"This is the speech that made gambling addicts cringe," Webb, R-Kanawha, said.

But proponents of the legislation said allowing the four racetracks that have video lottery machines to convert them to award coins or tokens as prizes, rather than paper vouchers, would not be a major change.

"This is a good bill and it is not an expansion of gambling," House Finance Vice Chairman John Doyle, D-Jefferson, said.

One of the four tracks is located in Charles Town in Jefferson County.

Doyle said the racetrack needs to upgrade the machines to stay competitive with neighboring Delaware, where slot machines are offered.

"This is primarily a bill about competition," he said.

Also on Friday, the House passed a bill to try to get a handle on what have been termed "gray machines," video poker machines that are supposed to be for entertainment only, but are being used by some for illegal gambling.

The legislation would require businesses with gray machines to register them with the state Alcohol and Beverage Control Commission.

Before the coin-drop bill passed, Webb spoke with anger about the issue, calling the machines "sleazy." "I'm angry because I have to be a part of a legacy and I don't want to be part of a legacy," he said.

Webb said the legislation, which must now go before the Senate, would move West Virginia from being on the "periphery" of gaming "into the mainstream." He said the bill was hypocritical because it would allow track owners to make the games more enticing to gamblers, yet set aside \$500,000 each year for the state Lottery Commission to help compulsive gamblers.

Webb and some other delegates questioned why they could not get any information on the level of profit the tracks are currently earning.

It's estimated that the conversion could bring in about \$31.5 million more from gamblers, about \$9 million

of which would go to the state.

"Who comes out ahead on the deal? It's the tracks," Webb said.

Delegate Eustace Frederick, a steadfast opponent of gaming, spent several minutes ticking off statistics about suicide, divorce and crime from states where there is widespread gambling.

Delegate Tim Armstead, who was appointed to Henderson's seat and then was elected in November, said studies show that the faster people get results from a game, the more likely it is they will become addicted.

At least with voucher payouts, the player has to take the time to go to a window and get his or her, he said.

"You just might not go back there and do it again and that's what the people who want this bill are afraid of," Armstead, R-Kanawha, said.

"I don't think that we can question that this will increase compulsive gambling." Delegate Jerry Kelley, D-Putnam, spoke gravely about the measure, looking into a nearby television camera.

"Your Legislature is on the verge of legalizing slot machines," he said. "Do you want to leave this legacy to your children, your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren?" And Delegate Paul Prunty called the change a "quick fix" source of revenue.

"This proliferation is not going to stop as the erosion of our society is not going to stop," Prunty, D-Marion, said.

But Delegate A. James Manchin boomed that he would have a clear conscience about voting in favor of the legislation, regardless of what some delegates and church representatives have said.

"The people of West Virginia are good, decent, hard working people - they know what they want," Manchin, D-Marion, said.

He said people deserve to have the games for relaxation. He said addictions are everywhere, including hate and prejudice, and he questioned some of the statistics.

Manchin said he doesn't want to hear silence when he pulls the lever.

"I want to hear the coins drop," he said to laughter and applause.

But Henderson's 1997 tirade drew even more laughter.

Henderson, who often used props to help make a point, had pulled out a can of air freshener and sprayed it all over the bill, saying it stunk.

"I call it the ding-dong bill. I call it the lost-your-money-a-heck-of-a-lot-faster bill," Henderson said at the time.

The legislation, which faced some serious opposition that year, was removed from the House agenda.

Earlier in the Friday floor session, the delegates held the traditional ceremony marking the death of a delegate by approving a resolution noting Henderson's passing at age 71 of cancer.

They also voted in favor of another resolution recommending the state rename the bridge from Nitro to St. Albans the "Richard J. 'Dick' Henderson Memorial Bridge." Writer Stacey Ruckle can be reached at 348-5185.