



## Prospect of gambling coming to A.C. impacts Staten Island

By Dean Balsamini

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Advance file photo

D.A. Daniel Donovan (above) is not thrilled with the prospect of legal sports betting coming to Atlantic City Casinos. "It could create a new group of gamblers," he cautioned. "People who participate in their [office] Super Bowl pools, may say, 'Wouldn't it be more interesting to put a bet on the game?' Those newly created gamblers may [ultimately] become customers of illegal sports betting" on Staten Island.

Staten Island will feel the impact if Delaware's recent legalization of sports betting survives court challenges, and if efforts succeed to bring similar wagering to Atlantic City casinos.

There's no movement afoot to sanction sports wagering in New York state, which allows casinos on upstate Indian reservations and slot machines at about eight horse-racing tracks, including Yonkers Raceway.

But if New Jersey politicians can overturn the federal ban on sports betting, borough residents might make the two-plus-hour trip to Atlantic City to plunk down 50 bucks on the Super Bowl, the NCAA college basketball tournament, or even that day's Yankees-Orioles game.

"If you don't have gambling and people want to do it, they'll migrate," said Jonathan Peters, associate professor of finance at the College of Staten Island in Willowbrook. "It would make betting options available to them."

District Attorney Daniel Donovan isn't thrilled by that prospect.

"It could create a new group of gamblers," he cautioned. "People who participate in their [office] Super Bowl pools, may say, 'Wouldn't it be more interesting to put a bet on the game?' Those newly created gamblers

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may [ultimately] become customers of illegal sports betting" on Staten Island.

Earlier this spring, Delaware legalized sports betting and table games.

Delaware is one of four states -- Montana, Nevada and Oregon are the others -- that had forms of sports betting grandfathered in under a 1992 federal law outlawing sports wagering nationally.

Delaware officials predict an additional \$55 million in annual revenue for state coffers, if its sports betting plan proceeds. Sports wagering would be permitted only at the state's three racinos (racetracks and casinos) -- Delaware Park, Dover Downs and Harrington Raceway.

The nation's four major professional sports leagues -- Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, the National Football League and the National Hockey League -- oppose the move, saying broad-scale legalized betting could create incentives to cheat and fix games.

The four pro leagues along with the NCAA filed suit in Delaware federal court July 24 in an attempt to block the plan.

The sports betting market is lucrative.

An estimated \$380 billion a year is illegally gambled on sports. About \$90 million is bet on the Super Bowl alone.

Hoping to take a chunk of the betting pie -- and fend off threats to the nation's second-largest gambling market, after Nevada -- New Jersey state Sen. Raymond Lesniak, filed suit in Trenton federal court in March to eliminate the federal sports-betting ban. Gov. Jon Corzine supports the action.

The prime beneficiary would be Atlantic City, a convenient getaway for Staten Islanders.

Each day, hundreds of borough residents board buses that whisk them to the south Jersey casinos. Most are senior citizens, who enjoy the slot machines and gaming tables, said Laura Cagnetta, sales manager for the Port Richmond-based Atlantic Express, which runs buses seven days a week to Atlantic City.

Based on such clientele, she doesn't anticipate an uptick in ridership to Atlantic City if sports betting is legalized.

"It might help a charter [bus]company," Ms. Cagnetta said, adding that bars or other groups could sponsor New Jersey junkets to wager on big games.

Assuming the Nevada model holds true -- sports betting comprises only 1.2 percent of that state's gaming revenue -- Peters, the CSI professor, said Staten Islanders aren't likely to flock to Delaware or Atlantic City in droves.

But they might head the 100 miles or so south to lay down a few bucks for major sporting events such as the Super Bowl, World Series and the NCAA's Final Four tournament.

"It might serve as a catalyst at certain times of the year, but I don't think it would have a huge impact," he said.

Donovan, the district attorney, said legalized gambling will never eliminate illicit wagering.

For one thing, bookmakers offer better odds than the state. And, in many instances, it's more convenient to bet with the local bookie than travel to a legitimate establishment.

For those and other reasons, the district attorney doesn't think legalized out-of-state sports betting would greatly impact illegal wagering here. Illicit gambling on Staten Island is not a major problem, occurring "not more or less than it is in any community in America," he said.

But Donovan expressed concern that legalized sports wagering could become the equivalent of the biblical  
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apple that tempted Adam in the Garden of Eden.

"Gambling is an addiction, like drugs and alcohol," he said. "It might create a bigger universe of potential customers for bookies."

--- *Contributed by Frank Donnelly*

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