

Nearly half New Jersey residents agree with Christie, want sports betting now, poll shows

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A new statewide poll released Tuesday shows that 45 percent of New Jersey residents support going forward with sports betting at Atlantic City casinos and state racetracks despite the federal government's ban.

The Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind poll said that 38 percent were against moving forward without federal approval — as Gov. Chris Christie plans to do. But when asked if sports betting should happen in New Jersey if the federal ban were to be overturned, 58 percent were in favor, up from 53 percent in 2011.

Casino gamblers, at least those who had been to one within the past month, supported Christie's plan 53 percent to 41 percent.

The "reality," said Michael Busler, a fellow at the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, "is that sports betting exists, whether on a legal basis or illegal basis, and media studies have shown the dollar amount from it goes into the hundreds of millions of dollars. So Atlantic City, as everyone knows, has been in a lot of trouble over the last four years, and they need something to help revive Atlantic City. ... What they need to do is bring more people here, and sports betting will do that."

A referendum to allow sports betting in the state was already approved in 2011 by a 2-1 margin, which allowed the Legislature to go forward with a bill earlier this year. Meanwhile, the NCAA, MLB, NBA, NFL and NHL have all sued the state to prevent sports betting from happening.

Currently, federal law allows four states, Delaware, Montana, Nevada and Oregon, to have sports betting because they were grandfathered in before the federal ban in 1992. If New Jersey had joined them, it would have been the fifth state.

"We had the chance to get sports betting in New Jersey (in 1992), but we wouldn't even put it on the ballot for referendum," Busler said. "Now, it turns out, last November they did put it on the ballot and it passed."

Christie's view, Busler said, "is that he's just going to go ahead and implement it ... and let the courts and (U.S.) Justice Department tell him it's not a legitimate thing to do. It's kind of a gutsy way to do things, but he's trying to do what he can do to help Atlantic City."

State Sen. Jim Whelan, D-Atlantic, said that he and others in the Legislature have advocated just that. He also criticized the "hypocrisy" of the NCAA and sports leagues, who have stated in their lawsuit that sports betting threatens the "character and integrity" of sports.

"(It's) just overwhelming," Whelan said Tuesday. "You watch ESPN, which the NCAA and other leagues are

contracted with, and (they) tell you not only who they think is going to win the game, but who's going to cover the spread. The NFL is contracted with ESPN, and they can't have it both ways. They pump up the ratings for their shows, when they're clearly referring to gambling, but as long as they don't do it during games it's somehow OK."

Whelan was also critical of NFL owners such as the Glazers, who own both the Tampa Bay Buccaneers football team and the Manchester United soccer club in England — where sports betting is legal — and also Caesars Entertainment CEO Gary Loveman, who is a part owner in the Boston Celtics.

"What side is he on?" Whelan asked.

Assemblyman John Amodio, R-Atlantic, also cited the poll and the recent referendum as support for Christie's plan.

"I just think it's evident that the governor wants to bring this to a resolution," Amodio said. "We've moved forward, rather than wait to get the OK from (the Justice Department). The governor's plan from Day One was to push it forward, get an answer and make sports betting an issue nationally and in the state of New Jersey."

Otherwise, Amodio said, "if you just sit back after the legislation was signed and wait for an answer ... we could be in litigation for three to five years. At least this way we know where it stands in the short term."

Still, both legislators added that sports betting is not a cure-all for Atlantic City, which saw a 13 percent drop in gross operating profit during the second quarter of this year compared to 2011, according to the Division of Gaming Enforcement — mostly due to Revel's \$35 million operating loss.

"It's not like it will be a great amount (of new revenue) or a game-changer," Amodio said. "But it will bring people into town during big sports weeks like the Super Bowl."

Added Whelan, "Realistically for Atlantic City, once we get it, other states are going to get it quickly. But at least we'll have a head start, and (casinos) will do a good marketing campaign."

The statewide telephone poll of 945 registered and unregistered voters was conducted late last month, before the lawsuit from the sports leagues. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.3 percentage points.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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