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Sports Betting: Uncertain Agenda in Washington

BY STEPHEN DOW BECKHAM

Major league sports loom large in Washington, home of the Seahawks, Mariners, and Sounders. To change the state's anti-gaming prohibitions would require a two-thirds supermajority (60%) of the legislature or a statewide referendum.

The 6-3 decision of the Supreme Court to overturn PASPA, however, has generated interest. The Washington State Gambling Commission is looking closely at Sports Betting. Gaming is widespread in Washington with 32 tribal casinos and bingo halls. The state also permits poker, horse racing, lotteries, charitable gaming, and social gambling (card rooms). It prohibits dog racing and online gambling.

Washington is one of seven states with no personal income tax. Residents, however, pay a 6.5% sales tax, the tenth highest in the nation. They also pay \$.49 per gallon gasoline tax and a \$.484% Business and Occupation

Tax on manufacturing goods within the state. Some see income generated by Sports Betting as direct tax relief, a voluntary contribution to the state to fund social services, education, government, and other needs.

In spite of its strong stand in the past against Sports Betting, the Washington legislature in 1973 authorized regulated sports pools. A square sheet of paper or a board is divided into 100 equal squares, each of which constitutes a chance to win in the sports pool and each of which is offered directly to prospective contestants at one dollar or less. Players purchase a chance (or square) and sign his or her name in that area. These pre-digital pools are common in bars during football season.

Washington's antiquated sports pools may be the key to expansion of Sports Betting in the state because they were "grandfathered," namely authorized prior to PASPA (1992).*

“Washington is still a pretty conservative state as far as gambling goes. And this is entirely, 100 percent in the hands of the Legislature. So nothing can happen, obviously, until next year at the earliest.”

—Chris Stearns, Commissioner, Washington State Gambling Commission, May, 2018



A view of the legislative building from Capitol lake in Olympia Washington.