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News Coverage on EffectiveNY

Senator: Casinos Should Pay for ?Fair? Elections

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A state Senator and reform advocate Monday proposed generating revenue for campaign finance reform by charging licensing fees to casinos in New York, should they be allowed to operate in the state.

Sen. Liz Krueger, D-Manhattan, and Bill Samuels, Rochester-native and chairman of Albany-reform group New Roosevelt, addressed arguments against using taxpayer dollars to finance elections by suggesting the state collect \$8 million annually from each of seven casinos in licensing fees.

The Legislature voted last year to enact a Constitutional amendment allowing seven casinos to operate in the state. The newly elected Legislature would need to approve it again this year, and then the question would go to voters.

“We need to do public financing of campaigns in New York state. We need to get out of the business of having people with huge amounts of money and special interests deciding who wins elections in New York or even who has the right to run for election in New York State,” Krueger said at a Capitol news conference Monday. “And we can do this with a relatively small amount of money every cycle.”

Krueger said \$56 million is a conservative estimate of what it would cost to finance elections.

Democrats and advocacy groups have pushed for a public option modeled after New York City's, which matches small campaign donations at a 6-to-1 rate. The aim would be to “level the playing field” for non-wealthy candidates.

Cuomo has said he supports publicly financed elections, and he is also trying to reform the state's disclosure laws.

Republicans have opposed using taxpayer dollars to fund elections.

"If we're going to bring casinos into New York state, let's have them pay for our campaigns," she said. "They are coming here to make an enormous amount of money from themselves."

Krueger said a fee of \$8 million annually would not serve as a deterrent for casinos looking to locate in New York, as it would be a small percentage of what the prospective casinos' annual revenues.

The senator said she is "agnostic" on the casino issue – she could easily argue for or against legalizing them in the state. But she said she is a pragmatist, and she believes casinos will likely be allowed in New York regardless of whether she opposes it.

So she's pushing for there to be a public benefit from the casinos' operation – not only through collecting money for public education, but also for "fair elections."

Samuels offered several examples of when Cuomo advocated for publicly financed elections but questioned whether he has worked to bring that goal to fruition.

"We want to box him in," he said. "We're going to hold you accountable. And we want it to take effect in 2014, when you're running for re-election."

UPDATE:

Cuomo said at a meeting in Albany Monday that there are many issues worth funding, not just campaign-finance reform.

"We have to fund education," he said. "We have to fund roads and bridges. We have people who need homes in the Rockaways—they have to be funded. We're rebuilding from Hurricane Irene; we have to finish doing that.

"We have a lot of important issues, and an individual legislator can have their own particular interest, but at the end of the day, we have to fund a lot of top priorities," he continued.

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