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To keep gambling honest

Governor's reappointment of Jaffe puts Illinois' integrity first

Some of the legislators angry at Gov. Pat Quinn for withholding their pay and a hundred other grudges are about to have one more: In response to our inquiries, Quinn's communications director, Brooke Anderson, tells us that on Friday he will reappoint two excellent members of the Illinois Gaming Board, Chairman Aaron Jaffe, who has served on the board for eight years, and Michael Holewinski, who has served for almost two. Both men's terms expired July 1.

Quinn's choices, especially of Jaffe, will fluster lawmakers who for years have wanted to gut state oversight of legalized gambling. These are the legislators who, in bills that didn't become law, have tried to fire the entire Gaming Board, permit Chicago's City Hall to regulate any city-owned casino, exclude the Illinois State Police from preventing mob influence at a Chicago casino and force the rollout of video gambling before investigators could finish background checks of people and businesses seeking state licenses.

Jaffe's insistence on a singular priority — protecting the integrity of Illinois gambling — infuriates petulant lawmakers who don't want to admit that thorough investigations take time.

As you've read here before, these Springfield wise guys hear the word "gambling" and think "easy revenue" rather than "potential for organized crime." Quinn understands what Jaffe understands but what many legislators do not: Word of a crime scandal at any Illinois casino would immediately drive away gamblers, devastate the industry statewide — and choke a revenue stream that reliably pours roughly a half-billion dollars a year into state and local government treasuries.

Two recent ex-governors (hint: for unrelated reasons, both now are federal convicts) tried to improperly influence Gaming Board decisions. They and other clouted pols failed because a long line of board members — Gregory Jones, Gary Peterlin, Charles Gardner and others — withstood the kind of pressure some lawmakers have marshaled against Jaffe.

Gaming Board members must be confirmed by the Senate, so don't be surprised by more sabotage efforts: With one seat on the five-member panel now vacant, the reconfirmation roster includes not only Jaffe and Holewinski, but also another first-rate member, Lee Gould. (The term of the fourth member, Maribeth Vander Weele, expires July 1, 2014.)

~~We've always hoped that the lawmakers who fill their pockets with gambling industry contributions, and who want the independent Gaming Board to be anything but the independent law enforcement agency it is, would make a frontal assault on nominees such as these three. We cannot wait to see which senators would speak or vote against Jaffe, Holewinski or Gould and their stellar record of insulating the Illinois gambling industry.~~

We're hard-pressed to think of another agency in Illinois' often dysfunctional state government that has kept its head so far above political pressure, bureaucratic inertia and threats of criminal influence. Four times in its history the Gaming Board, its investigators and regulators have confronted the sorts of wrongdoing or inappropriate associations that in other states have erupted into devastating scandals. Four times the Gaming Board acted firmly, without regard for politics, and as a result this industry hasn't suffered long-term embarrassments.

Quinn is deservedly proud of his record on state-licensed gambling: He repeatedly has rejected legislation that would expand gambling while undermining public oversight. Lawmakers refuse to draft and send him a bill with a modest expansion of gambling and stronger oversight.

Governor Quinn, we realize how easy it would be, when you want legislators' cooperation on pension reforms, to quietly ease Jaffe and Holewinski off the Gaming Board. The fact that you're not caving to the Springfield wise guys is as much a credit to you as it is to the board members you're reappointing.

For all of us — well, for most of us — the mission is straightforward but always at risk: to keep gambling honest in Illinois.