

Restoration of VLT funds: Sen. Hugh Farley: \$2 million in VLT funding to Saratoga Springs, Saratoga County proposed to be restored in state budget

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ALBANY — Tuesday afternoon, a plan to restore a combined total of nearly \$2 million in state funding to Saratoga Springs and Saratoga County as host municipalities for video lottery terminal gambling machines was agreed upon by state legislators for inclusion in the 2011-12 state budget.

Sen. Hugh Farley, R-Schenectady, said Tuesday that an agreement had been reached Monday night among the Senate, Assembly and Gov. Andrew Cuomo that would restore VLT host funding to 17 upstate municipalities, including the Spa City, at a rate of 45 percent of the aid received in 2008.

Under this plan, Saratoga Springs is slated to receive \$1,496,000, and Saratoga County would receive \$499,000, for a total of \$1,995,000.

VLT funding to all host municipalities, excluding Yonkers, had been cut completely in Cuomo's proposed executive budget.

At the Tuesday afternoon meeting of the Budget Conference Committee on General Government and Local Assistance — for which Farley was co-chairman with Assemblyman William Magnarelli, D-Syracuse — the measure was included in the committee's final report. That now goes to the General Conference Committee, co-chaired by Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos, who will craft the language that will head to both houses for approval.

"It's a done deal," Farley said, after the committee submitted their report.

"It costs money to host a VLT facility, from plowing the roads to emergency response," said Sen. Roy McDonald, R-Saratoga, in a release on the proposal. "This isn't just aid, but an investment in ensuring the continued success of the Saratoga Springs VLT location."

"Everybody is very realistic in their approach," he said, in an interview Tuesday, adding that the agreement will not be final until Cuomo signs the budget.

McDonald went on to say that there were many more issues still being discussed by the Senate Racing, Gaming and Wagering committee, including a long-term plan for the management of horseracing and casino gambling.

"There's a lot of work to be done," he said, adding that he was "very grateful" for the openness displayed by the Assembly and Gov. Cuomo during negotiations.

"There was strength in numbers this year," said Assemblyman Jim Tedisco, R-Glenville, citing a Feb. 8 breakfast meeting between Cuomo and the Assembly Republican Conference, where he was joined by lawmakers from several other districts who also opposed the cuts.

"He said he would take a look at it and he kept his word," Tedisco said of the governor, adding that the next step would be negotiating for the removal of a proposed 2.75 percent surcharge on thoroughbred race purses that is also included in Cuomo's budget.

The state's 2011-12 budget must be approved by a vote in both the Senate and the Assembly before being sent to Cuomo, who may seek to veto sections before final approval.

The city and county first received VLT host aid in the state's 2007 budget, on the basis that the funds would help defray the cost of maintaining infrastructure for facilities hosting VLTs and public safety services.

After proposing a 50-percent cut to VLT funding in 2008, a measure in Gov. David Paterson's 2009 executive budget stipulated that aid be distributed on the basis of municipal poverty rates, which cut funding to Saratoga Springs.

"All the work on this for the past two years is paying off," Saratoga Springs Supervisor Joanne Yepsen said in a statement thanking everyone who has advocated for the fund restoration.

"That is like the best news I've heard all year," city Public Works Commissioner Anthony "Skip" Scirocco said.

"When budget time comes around, we can use some of that money, or all of that money, to reduce the burden on the taxpayers," he said, calling the funding, "something we should've gotten all along."

"Obviously that's a considerable amount," said city Finance Commissioner Kenneth Ivins Jr. when asked about the proposed restoration, calling Tuesday's agreement "one more step" toward a completed state budget.

"I don't propose we go out and spend it on a whole bunch of things," he said, adding that he would support applying any restored funding to the city's unreserved unappropriated fund balance, which has been diminished over the past several years.

"I would probably take half of that and rebate it, take the other half and put it in reserves," said city Accounts Commissioner John Franck, responding to a question about discussions he initiated during the passage of the city's 2011 budget of a possible rebate to city property taxpayers pending the realization of new revenue.

Franck added that he would advocate putting as much of the restored funding as possible into the city's reserves.

"Timing is everything, and certainly this will come in good use," said Mayor Scott Johnson, referring to the agreement as a "light at the end of the tunnel."

"The council should decide what use to put it to," he continued, adding that regardless of what may become of the funding if approved in the state budget, he would not want it included in the city's operational budget.

"That happened in the past, and look where it got us," he said, referring to the budget deficit created when VLT funding was cut in 2009.

Public Safety Commissioner Richard Wirth could not be reached for comment Tuesday.