

The times are a changin' – Louisiana Creates the Riverboat Economic Development and Gaming Task Force

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This summer, a concurrent resolution that creates a Riverboat Economic Development and Gaming Task Force ("Task Force") was adopted during the regular session of the Louisiana State Legislature. The Task Force, to be chaired by Ronnie Jones, Chairman of the Louisiana Gaming Control Board, is charged with (1) studying current law and existing rules and regulations regarding riverboat gaming, (2) receiving public input relative to same, and (3) presenting a written report to the House Committee on Administration of Criminal Justice and the Senate Committee on Judiciary B no later than 60 days prior to the beginning of the 2018 Regular Session. The report is to make recommendations that include, but are not limited to, changes in current law, rules and regulations; (1) to further generate and promote increased economic development by riverboat gaming licensees, (2) to provide for greater safety for patrons and employees of riverboat casinos, (3) to encourage increased capital reinvestment by riverboat gaming licensees, (4) to improve and enhance the regulation of riverboat gaming licensees, and (5) to make Louisiana riverboat casinos more competitive with gaming enterprises in nearby jurisdictions.

Besides Chairman Jones, members of the Task Force include the chairman of the House and Senate Committees that handle gaming bills and the following or their designees: the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House, the Superintendent of the State Police, the Attorney General and the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Economic Development. Additionally, representing the Louisiana riverboat gaming industry on the Task Force is Wade Duty, Executive Director of the Louisiana Casino Association.

One member of the Task Force states that he sees the Task Force as being the vehicle by which changes in current law, rules, and regulations can be made to increase jobs, construction, and economic development associated with the riverboat gaming industry. He stated that while the riverboat gaming industry has changed during the last 25 years, the Louisiana laws relating to riverboat gaming enacted in 1991 remain relatively unchanged.

The Task Force will meet monthly and had its first meeting in September. Starting in October, CEOs of Louisiana riverboat gaming licensees will appear before the Task Force to discuss changes in current law that might serve to make the Louisiana riverboat gaming industry grow and prosper. Chairman Jones also has invited interested parties to submit topics for the Task Force to consider.

It remains to be seen what changes the Task Force will recommend. Conceivably such changes may focus on riverboat casino design and construction of recent years that reflects a departure from the original 19th Century replica riverboats that were required to regularly cruise. Those older riverboat casinos not only have a competitive disadvantage to newer riverboat casinos that have many of the characteristics of a dockside facility, but their proximity to navigable channels potentially place the safety and welfare of their patrons and employees in jeopardy. It is unknown whether such changes will duplicate Louisiana's neighbor, Mississippi, and allow land-based casinos (in addition to the one land-based casino in New Orleans allowed under current law). It is anticipated, however, that the Task Force will be reticent to recommend an increase in the number of riverboat gaming licenses currently limited to 15, much less remove any restriction on the number as is the case in Mississippi.

In any event, as cross-border competition grows, the creation of the Riverboat Economic Development and Gaming Task Force is an important step that Louisiana is taking in order to ensure that the riverboat gaming industry remains the significant economic driver in the state that it has been for more than two decades.

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National Law Review, Volume VI, Number 291

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