

Casino gambling legislation for Parliament on January 11

Contributed by Miranda La Rose
Saturday, 30 December 2006

The government will lay the casino gambling legislation in Parliament on January 11 with the expectation that the debate on and passage of the bill would be completed at the earliest time thereafter.

Contacted for an update on the consultations and the status of the casino gambling legislation, Prime Minister Sam Hinds told the Stabroek News that the government submitted to Parliament on Thursday three signed copies for publication and distribution to the members of Parliament.

Apart from the fact that casino licences would not be granted to any hotel with fewer than 250 rooms or below four-star standard and that the casinos would not be open to Guyanese, the provisions of the bills are not been widely known.

Government is hoping to push the bill through Parliament in time for Cricket World Cup and to accommodate Buddy's International Hotel and Resorts, which would apparently be the only hotel eligible to receive the licence in the first instance.

On Thursday, President Bharrat Jagdeo had indicated that the government was in discussion with a number of groups for the construction of other hotels in the country, which it is expected would also be granted casino licences based on certain criteria.

Hinds said he had held consultations with some sections of the religious community because the government recognised that the religious groups were particularly concerned about casino gambling.

On religious grounds, he said, they were all against gambling of any sort including sweepstakes, lotteries and horseracing and they could not approve of casino gambling.

He said the government understood and appreciated the position of the religious leaders and "would certainly guard against the potentials evils that they pointed to." These include the dangers of addiction to gambling. "We are certainly aware of those dangers. We will keep an eye on them and try to guard against them," he said adding that people in general, however, could form addictions to many things including food and even exercise.

Though he did not provide a name, Hinds said there was one member of the religious community who said he had seen casino gambling in Atlantic City and while he maintained his theological position against gambling and would not take part in it, he understood that casino gambling was a fairly common form of entertainment for modern society.

Hinds met the groups on December 8 at his Kingston office but said he did not get the kind of attendance he had expected. He said there were representatives of temples from the Hindu community, three churches from the Christian community and four mosques from the Muslim community.

Though a number of umbrella organisations were invited, Hinds said that some representatives contacted him after the meeting stating that the invitation to the consultation was given at short notice or they were not available to attend at the requested time.

Asked about representations from other stakeholders such as tour operators and the private sector, Hinds said he met the religious community during a period when the President was out of the country and he was deputising on his behalf. He said Jagdeo would have met with other stakeholders to solicit their views and their recommendations would have been considered as well.

These include the view that it would be hypocritical of the government to allow foreigners but not Guyanese who travel outside the country and take part in casino gambling activities, access to local casinos .

Hinds said that these stakeholders, however, understand that casino gambling was "an important component in our total tourism product particularly to provide entertainment in the evening."

When contacted representatives of the Tourism and Hospitality Association of Guyana (THAG), the Private Sector Commission (PSC) and the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA) told the Stabroek News that while they were aware of the discussions and debate and might have taken part they were not consulted by the government nor had they seen a copy of the draft bill.