

DAILY SOUTHTOWN

Will County lifts video gaming ban for unincorporated areas



The Will County Board voted July 18, 2024, to lift a ban on video gaming in unincorporated areas. (Mike Nolan/Daily Southtown)



By **MICHELLE MULLINS** | Chicago Tribune

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The Will County Board voted Thursday to reverse a nine-year ban on video gaming and will now allow gaming to expand in unincorporated areas of the county.

The board voted 13-9 in 2015 to prohibit gaming after then-chairman Jim Moustis of Frankfort said his constituents were opposed to any gambling expansion. The county had not taken action to opt out of the state's video gambling law when it was adopted in 2009, so the businesses that already had gaming have been allowed to keep their machines.

The county board voted 17-1 Thursday to repeal its 2015 ordinance and will now allow for new gaming licenses. The board also approved 13-5 enacting a \$250 fee on each gaming terminal.

Board members said prohibiting video gaming in the unincorporated areas was unfair to businesses there that compete with businesses in municipalities that allow gaming.

Will County municipalities that allow video gaming include Beecher, Homer Glen, Lockport, Mokena, Monee, New Lenox and University Park, according to the Illinois Gaming Board.

Bolingbrook and Naperville prohibit gaming, while Crete and Frankfort offer limited gaming in their communities, according to the Illinois Gaming Board.



The perception of video gaming has changed over the last decade, and communities have found it has not brought in the corruption or crime feared by some residents when the gaming law was first enacted, board member Vince Logan, a Joliet Republican, said.

Gaming helps small businesses survive in tough economic times or when costs for food, drinks, utilities and wages increase, Logan said.

"It is a savior for a lot of businesses," he said.

Board Chair Judy Ogalla, a Monee Republican, agreed.

Logan polled businesses in unincorporated Will County that have liquor licenses, a requirement to obtain a gaming license, and said about half responded they would be interested in exploring gaming. Logan said the gaming ordinance would likely benefit existing liquor licenses holders.

The revenue generated would also help the county, he said.

The 18 businesses in unincorporated Will County that secured gaming licenses before the county prohibited it generate about \$325,000 in revenue annually for the county.

While an exact estimate of potential revenue is not known, Logan said the county is likely to at least double the revenue it receives from gaming.

"All we are doing is accepting a check from the state, and it's not a tax," Logan said.

A proposal to put any future gaming revenue into a special fund and earmark it for a designated purpose did not make it out of committee. The county board's Executive Committee last week opted to put gaming revenue in the general fund.

The county will now charge a \$250 per terminal fee for each gaming machine, which is split between the terminal operator and the business owner. Bars and restaurants can have up to six machines, according to state law.

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Businesses would have to renew their gaming license along with their liquor license yearly.

Ogalla, who was one of five board members to oppose the fee, said she was against charging business owners and it seemed as though they were being nickel and dimed.

"Government needs to live within its means," Ogalla said.

Michelle Mullins is a freelance reporter.

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