



By Carl Golden | Posted: Wednesday, May 30, 2012 12:30 pm

Gov. Chris Christie built his career and reputation by painting in bold strokes. Last week, he splashed brilliant colors across the political canvas once again, announcing he intended to disregard federal law and permit casinos and racetracks to accept wagering on professional and college athletics.

Christie said he would defy the 20-year-old law prohibiting sports betting in all but the four states that had some form of it at the time. The governor's announcement recognized that there is little likelihood Congress will repeal the law, leaving intervention by a federal court as the only alternative.

By forcing the government's hand, daring it to act against any casino or racetrack that offered sports betting, Christie may have actually hastened a court challenge.

The casino industry has long supported sports betting, but initially expressed concern over Christie's prediction that it would become reality this fall, when the football season is in full swing and billions of dollars are wagered, most of it illegally.

Casinos would be reluctant to invest the considerable sums of money required to establish a sports-betting operation as long as a cloud of uncertainty remained over it. If, for instance, a court upheld the federal ban, a casino would be forced to shut down its sports book parlor and absorb a significant loss.

Despite their belief that the law is unfair, if not unconstitutional, casino executives do not fully share the governor's enthusiasm for picking a fight with federal authorities, nor are they eager to commit resources to a venture on the assumption that the dispute will turn out in their favor. Violating federal law gives them sufficient pause.

Assuming a casino decides to move ahead only to lose in court after months of operation, could it be held liable if gamblers who lost money in the interim sue to recoup their losses by arguing that they were incurred through an illegal enterprise?

In this litigation-obsessed society, such action is highly likely.

Christie certainly has public opinion on his side. Last year's referendum seeking approval of sports betting was approved by a 2-1 margin, carrying handily in all 21 counties. His move toward legalization will result in no political backlash.

Most people have become accustomed to and largely comfortable with government-sanctioned gambling, whether it is casino gaming, parimutuel betting at racetracks, or the bewildering array of lottery games.

They see no difference between plunking down 50 bucks on No. 5 black on a roulette wheel and plunking down 50 bucks to back up a belief that the Giants are three points better than the Redskins.

They point to the billions wagered illegally — all of which directly benefit larger criminal enterprises while depriving government of millions in tax revenue and turning otherwise law-abiding citizens into criminals.

The arguments advanced by the National Football League and the NCAA against sports betting — principally, that it undermines the integrity of the games — is no longer accepted. They dismiss the league's stance as hypocritical, pointing out that it maintains an ongoing collaborative relationship with media outlets that regularly broadcast or print point spreads, reports of injuries to key players that could potentially alter the outcome of a game, and predictions by self-appointed experts.

Such information has but one aim: helping those who wish to place a bet gain a bit of an edge. It is naive to believe it's designed to add to one's general storehouse of knowledge about football.

While sports betting would be an additional draw to bring customers to casinos and spend money on hotel rooms, dining, shows and shopping, it is not the windfall for government that some supporters claim.

In Las Vegas, the largest sports book in the country, for instance, it accounted for only \$129 million, 1.2 per cent of the \$10.9 billion in total gaming revenue, according to figures from 2010.

Moreover, should the federal prohibition be overturned, Pennsylvania and New York — the principal competitors for the gambling dollar — will quickly permit their state's casinos to offer sports book, blunting any competitive edge New Jersey might have enjoyed.

Given the governor's ambitious timetable and the casino industry's wariness of becoming deeply and expensively

