

Adelson's deep pockets could influence online gaming in Nevada

By Anjeanette Damon, Las Vegas Sun

As Nevada gaming lobbyists diligently lay the groundwork for what might be a final end-of-the-year push for federal legislation legalizing online poker, perhaps the biggest wild card is a man who has vowed to spend as much as \$100 million influencing this year's election.

Las Vegas casino mogul Sheldon Adelson has spent \$26 million on the presidential race and is likely to sink resources into Nevada's U.S. Senate race – in which his longtime nemesis, Democrat Shelley Berkley, is running.

And Adelson, chairman and CEO of Las Vegas Sands Corp., doesn't like online gambling. At all.

Berkley's Republican opponent, Sen. Dean Heller, stands to benefit from the substantial influence and money Adelson will bring to the race. But Heller continues to favor online poker.

"Sen. Heller continues to support legalizing Internet poker and has been working closely with both Sen. (Harry) Reid and Sen. (Jon) Kyl on legislation to achieve this goal," Heller's spokesman, Stewart Bybee, said in a written statement.

Bybee said Heller wasn't available for an interview for this story.

Jan Jones, vice president of public affairs for Caesars Entertainment, which has been actively lobbying for passage of online poker legislation, echoed Bybee's statement.

"Sen. Heller has been excellent," Jones said. "He's fully

engaged and understands the importance of the legislation to Nevada.”

As a Republican in the Senate, Heller could play a role in winning over skeptical members of his party – those who worry about the proliferation of gambling if Congress legalizes online poker. Indeed, some blame former Sen. John Ensign for failing in that role in 2010 when he was in the thick of the scandal surrounding his extramarital affair.

Kyl, an Arizona Republican, had been a roadblock to the legislation but has since been convinced that gambling proliferation would be worse if individual states jump into the business, creating a patchwork of licensing and regulatory schemes.

That’s starting to happen now in the wake of a Department of Justice opinion that the federal Wire Act prohibits only online sports betting, not all online gambling.

Nevada companies are ramping up in preparation not just for federal legalization, but also to enter markets in states that legalize online play. Station Casinos this month launched Ultimate Poker, a free play site, on Facebook. Also this month, the Nevada Gaming Commission issued online betting licenses to Bally Technologies and International Game Technology.

Although Nevada gaming companies stand ready to take advantage of individual state markets, they are better poised to capitalize on a national market, where their name-brand sites are familiar.

But even as lobbyists rush to convince lawmakers that a federal law legalizing online poker – and outlawing other types of Internet gambling – is needed, many say it’s Adelson who should be worked. Adelson’s influence with Republican leadership in the House, especially Majority Leader Eric Cantor, is more of a threat to online poker legislation than

the money he is spending to back Heller, lobbyists say.

“Eric and Sheldon talk all the time; it’s an ongoing dialogue,” one industry lobbyist said. “Dean is one vote, where Eric controls the agenda.”

The question is how engaged Adelson decides to become on the issue.

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