

Senate approves online gaming bill with half of GOP caucus opposed

Posted on Tuesday, Mar 17, 2026

The state Senate voted today to open the door to allowing online gaming in Wisconsin as the issue split both Republican and Democratic caucuses over concerns the move would exacerbate the downsides of gambling, including addiction.

The Senate approved the bill 21-12 with nine Republicans — half of the caucus — and three Dems opposed. It now goes to Dem Gov. Tony Evers. If he signs the bill, Evers would then be allowed to negotiate new compacts with Wisconsin's Native American tribes, who would be the only ones in the state that could offer online gaming.

Sen. Chris Larson, D-Milwaukee, told the Senate he met his wife at a dog track, joking, "She took a big bet." He argued placing the option to bet in someone's pocket through their smartphone would exacerbate negative behaviors.

"Until we have in place some protections to make sure that people are not falling down black holes of despair placing one bet in front of the other, I do think it is time to pause," Larson said.

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Senate Minority Leader Dianne Hesselbein, D-Middleton, urged support of the legislation, which has been a priority this session for several tribes. She said passage would allow the governor to reopen gaming compacts with tribes, allowing the safeguards that Larson sought to be added.

"There is a give and take in that process," she said.

Under AB 601, the servers offering online gaming would have to be located on tribal

lands. A coalition of online gaming companies lobbied against the bill, which was backed by several tribes, as well as the Milwaukee Brewers and the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce.

The GOP split over the bill generated significant interest heading into today's vote. Sen. Chris Kapenga, R-Delafield, suggested that Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, could lose his leadership position if he brought the online gaming bill and a name, image and likeness bill to the Senate floor over GOP opposition.

Republicans have an 18-15 majority and in the end, half of the GOP caucus voted against the bill. The nine were: Julian Bradley, of New Berlin; Rachael Cabral-Guevara, of Fox Crossing; Rob Hutton, of Brookfield; Andre Jacque, of New Franken; Kapenga; Steve Nass, of Whitewater; Romaine Quinn, of Birchwood; Rob Stafsholt, of New Richmond; and Eric Wimberger, of Gillett.

The Dems who opposed the bill were: Sarah Keyeski, of Lodi; Larson; and Jamie Wall, of Green Bay.

Nass, who's retiring, called the bill an example of the worst in politics, saying the public doesn't want it. He cited a recent Marquette University Law School Poll that found 64% of the public opposed allowing online gaming, adding lawmakers decided to take it up anyway due to the influence of special interests.

"As the campaigns proceed, follow the money," Nass said.