

Ohio senators could revive Gov. Mike DeWine's stadium funding plan -- with a twist

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COLUMBUS, Ohio— The Ohio Senate could consider a hybrid plan to fund the state's share of a new covered stadium for the Cleveland Browns, incorporating both Gov. Mike DeWine's proposal to increase taxes on sports gambling companies and a Browns-backed vision to issue state bonds.

State Sen. Jerry Cirino, the Republican chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said he's looking at several different options regarding state aid for a new Browns stadium. But he hasn't yet made a decision about which – if any – to support.

The Ohio House unceremoniously rejected DeWine's stadium-funding plan in favor of issuing \$600 million in state bonds for the \$2.4 billion stadium.

But a Republican state senator has already put forward a modified version of DeWine's plan to raise taxes on sports-betting companies to create a permanent source of funding for pro sports stadium projects in Ohio.

Another Republican on the Senate Finance committee indicated that plan could be used to pay for state-issued bonds for stadiums -- effectively combining DeWine's plan with the one Browns executives have pitched.

Lawmakers have until June 30 to adopt a new budget. After the Senate passes its budget, the two chambers will form a conference committee to hammer out a compromise to send to DeWine's desk.

Under DeWine's initial budget plan, Ohio's tax on sports-betting companies would be doubled, from 20% to 40%. The estimated \$288 million in additional revenue expected over the two-year budget would help fund pro sports stadium construction and renovations, as well as youth sports.

Ohio House Republicans dropped that plan, citing unease with raising taxes, and replaced it with the Browns' favored plan to have the state issue \$600 million in bonds for the new stadium, with the remainder coming from Cuyahoga County (\$600

million, to be repaid with local tourism taxes) and team owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam (\$1.2 billion, plus cost overruns). Under the team's plan, the state bonds would be paid off via new state tax revenue generated from the stadium and a [proposed \\$1 billion mixed-use development](#) surrounding it.

But now that the budget plan is in the hands of the Senate Finance Committee, there's more sympathy for DeWine's stated goal of creating a permanent source of funding for stadium projects going forward, rather than having lawmakers approve state aid for stadiums on a case-by-case basis. That's according to state Sen. Andrew Brenner, a Delaware County Republican and a Finance Committee member.

That's especially true, Brenner said, now that the Cincinnati Bengals and FC Cincinnati soccer team [are each lobbying for state help](#) with their own stadium projects.

[Senate Bill 150](#), introduced last month by state Sen. Lou Blessing, would create a permanent fund for stadium projects and youth sports similar to what DeWine has called for – though with some alterations, such as raising the tax on sports-betting companies to 36% instead of 40%.

Blessing, in an interview, said he's preparing to file an amendment to add SB150 to the state's budget plan, along with a companion amendment to erase the House's Browns stadium bond language.

While Blessing said he wasn't sure whether either of his budget amendments would be accepted, he said he believes that his fellow senators are "amenable" to the governor's assertion that they need to find a long-term solution to funding stadium projects in Ohio.

Otherwise, he said, if the Browns and/or Bengals get state assistance, it will open the floodgates for other pro sports teams in the state to come asking for help with their own stadium projects.

Brenner also said the Senate favors creating some sort of permanent source of stadium funding and believes the chamber will back a different plan than what the House passed.

Brenner also floated the idea of raising the sports-gaming tax in order to pay off bonds for stadiums – something Blessing said would be allowed under his bill.

“We have no problem raising the tax on sports gaming to underwrite the bonds,” Brenner said. By doing so, he said, it wouldn’t limit the state’s ability to issue bonds for other things, as the House-backed Browns stadium bonds would.

Cirino, a Lake County Republican who has significant power over which budget amendments will be accepted by the committee, indicated during a speech at the City Club of Cleveland last week that he wasn’t all-in on the House-backed Browns’ stadium bond plan.

Cirino said that he recently had a meeting with Jimmy Haslam, during which the Browns owner brought up the stadium project.

“And I said, ‘Jimmy, forget about the stadium. I just want to go to the Super Bowl before I die,’” Cirino said. “And he said, ‘I can’t make any promises.’ And I said, ‘Well, then neither can I.’”