

W.Va. House OKs martial arts bill

It will now move to the Senate



BY DAVID BEARD

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CHARLESTON — The House of Delegates approved the much-debated mixed martial arts bill Friday morning.

The bill had kicked up a windstorm of controversy Thursday morning because, as one delegate termed it, it's a "blood sport," and because the mixed martial arts (MMA) provisions were amended into an Athletic Commission bill in a manner Delegate Nancy Guthrie, D-Kanawha, likened to "a bunch of fat hustlers hatching out a scheme on a cocktail napkin."

Defenders of the amendment, which passed, argued that the bill was changed in a fair and open process, that only two or three other states ban it, that it's well-regulated and that MMA bouts could bring income into the state as boxing revenues dwindle.

Government Organization Committee Chairman Jim Morgan, D-Cabell, explained Friday that the bill began as a way to shore up the Athletic Commission's authority. A consultant's study said the commission has no physical office space, no phone book listing or website and limited ability to regulate boxing.

The Athletic Commission and Lottery Commission are both Commerce Department agencies, and the bill moves the Athletic Commission under the Lottery Commission to supply it with administrative support and office space.

The bill also beefs up the Athletic Commission's regulatory powers, and permits and regulates MMA.

"There is no belief this sport is considered ballroom dancing," Morgan said, but the bill calls for the commission to adopt the unified MMA rules, which establish tap-out provisions, round lengths, weight classes and fouls, "which would make this sport safe."

Delegate Danny Wells, D-Kanawha, tried to remove

the MMA amendment Thursday and opposed the bill Friday. He asked delegates to picture West Virginia's scenic beauty, and compare that with the red blood that will flow in MMA bouts.

The bill passed 55-37. Area delegates Mike Caputo, Linda Longstreth, Tim Manchin, Mike Manypenny, Dave Pethel, Stan Shaver and Larry Williams voted for it. Tony Barill, Barbara Evans Fleischauer and Charlene Marshall voted against it. Amanda Pasdon was absent.

It now goes to the Senate.

Election funding passes

The House unanimously passed SB 342, which transfers \$8 million to the governor's Civil Contingent Fund to use for the May and October special gubernatorial elections. The House made a technical wording adjustment, so the bill returns to the Senate for its OK before heading to the governor's office.

Secretary of State Natalie Tennant is a candidate in the gubernatorial race, and her office said Friday that should she win, the state constitution mandates she appoint a successor. Because there would be less than two years and six months left in her term (it ends in January 2013) the appointee would serve the remainder of the term; no special election would be needed.

Seat belt bill advances

The Senate Transportation and Infrastructure Committee passed, without discussion, SB 337, making failure to wear a seat belt a primary offense for which residents can get pulled over. It decreases the fine from up to \$25 to a flat \$15.

The bill goes next to the Senate Judiciary committee.

A similar House bill, 2062, is in the House Roads and Transportation committee. The major difference is that HB 2062 fixes the fine at a flat \$25.