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HEADLINE: Governor gains video-game 'task force';
Panel will advise on violent, sexually explicit selections

BYLINE: MIKE RAMSEY COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

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BODY:

Gov. Rod Blagojevich wants feedback about violent and sexually explicit video games, even though he already has proposed a crackdown on Illinois retailers who sell or rent them to minors.

The administration said Thursday a new "task force" will advise Blagojevich on the games he has targeted and their potential harmful effects on children and suggest ways to inform families about them. The panel includes first lady Patti Blagojevich, educators, medical experts and several parents from across Illinois, including Christine Westerlund, a 44-year-old mother of two from Chatham.

Westerlund said working parents like her feel uncomfortable about the possibility that their children may be getting access to unsuitable games without their consent. But the local library board member said she also has concerns about censorship.

"I really have an interest in children and what sorts of things they have access to," she said. "I support the concept, as long we're also thinking about the First Amendment."

Previous attempts to restrict video games in other states have been rejected by the courts on free-speech grounds, but Blagojevich says the legislation he's proposing would pass legal muster.

Earlier this month, he rolled out a proposal to fine or jail retailers who provide children under 18 with access to the most extreme games, such as "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas."

Critics have accused Blagojevich of grandstanding, and representatives of the video-game industry have said manufacturers use a rating system that informs consumers and parents about the content of games.

The governor's "Safe Games Illinois Task Force" doesn't appear to have any members who might challenge his idea. Blagojevich spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff said opponents will be able to share their views during the legislative process.

"The point of this task force is about getting information to other parents," she said.

Blagojevich previously has used the creation of a special panel to help bolster one of his initiatives. Early this year, as he asked lawmakers for control of the Illinois State Board of Education, the governor

assembled a commission on "educational accountability" to assist him with the plan.

The panel has met regularly to study reforms even after Blagojevich gained greater control of the board, according to task force member Glenn "Max" McGee, a former state school superintendent.

"The administration has been responsive and the members have been very active," he said recently.