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Approving slot machines not worth the gamble

May bring increased crime and lost business in long run

By **ROBERT TRISHMAN**

Copy Editor

Pennsylvania looks to be on the verge of taking a gamble, rolling the dice for more revenue. Governor Ed Rendell, as well as legislators before him, has talked of putting slot machines in Pennsylvania horse race tracks. There are, in fact, four bills pending in the State Legislature that would legalize slot machines.

The hope of this is to increase state revenue. The prospects for this look good. According to a study by gambling company Harrah's Entertainment, over 25,000 Pennsylvanians travel to New York, Delaware, New Jersey, and Canada to gamble. The study also found that they spend over \$2 billion on slot machines.

Putting slot machines in racetracks in Pennsylvania would keep most of those people's business in the state. The money would go primarily to college scholarships and also to Head Start education programs.

If this is successful, there might be casinos popping up in Pennsylvania. That would potentially bring more revenue to the state. But what else would it bring?

According to research done by the National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling (NCALG), other businesses could decline as fast as people can pull those slots. Casinos first opened in Atlantic City in 1979. Within four years, one-third of retail businesses in the city closed. Also, more than 70 percent of businesses in Natchez, Mississippi reported declining sales after the opening of a riverboat casino.

Nationally syndicated columnist George F. Will, whose columns periodically appear in the Patriot-News, wrote, "Gambling is debased speculation, a lust for sudden wealth that is not connected with the process of making society more productive of goods and services. Government support of gambling gives a (justification) to the pursuit of wealth without work."

To paraphrase, think of the old proverb, "Give a man a fish, and he will eat for a day. Teach a man a fish and he will eat for a lifetime." But in the case of gambling, it sounds something like this: "Give a man an opportunity to cast away a lot of his bait for the one-in-5 million chance that he can end up with a whole sea of fish."

The problem is, when the man sets his sights on that whole sea of fish, he may end up throwing all of his bait away, or even worse stealing someone else's bait. When the man realizes that those fish are nowhere to be found, he may even long for some wormy bait to eat.

Former Utah State Supreme Court Justice Dallin H. Oaks said that compulsive gambling brings a heavy cost in law enforcement. He wrote, "more than 80 percent of the compulsive gamblers who eventually sought help admitted that in pursuing their addiction they had committed felony crimes, usually against banks or other businesses."

Nevada, the gambling capital of the United States, has also become the crime capital. Between 1991 and 1996, the crime rate in Nevada rose 40 percent. In 1995 and 1996, the state had the number one crime rate in the nation, according to the NCALG.

There is also a link between gambling and bankruptcy. Tahira Hira, a family studies professor at Iowa State University, said, "When (people) gamble, they end up charging a lot more on their credit cards," which will drive them into debt. Hira also said, "If we continue the way things are, with availability and access increasing, that connection will be stronger."

Aside from the negative effects of gambling, it should be noted that there are lucrative alternatives. In his final speech as Pennsylvania governor, Tom Ridge advised the General Assembly to "be careful" in regards to expansion of gambling. He also pointed to another route, selling the state liquor stores. "Selling the state stores would generate hundreds of millions of dollars for important programs such as education or new water-and-sewer infrastructure," he said.

Gambling expansion is a potent threat to businesses, a catalyst for crime, a loophole to laziness, and drags people towards debt. It is not by any means a sure answer to revenue problems in Pennsylvania. Odds are it's just not worth it.

Look for Foreign Correspondent Marko Primorac's response in the next issue of *The Capital Times*.

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