

2011 lottery sales in Guilford add up to \$85 million

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GREENSBORO — Last year, Guilford County residents plopped down nearly \$85 million on the N.C. Education Lottery.

That translates to a per capita expenditure of \$226 for lottery tickets and instant scratch-off games, a figure well above the state average of \$212.

Across North Carolina, players spent \$1.5 billion.

But look for those numbers to soar when 2012 totals come out next year.

The reason? The record-breaking \$640 million Mega Millions jackpot, won Friday by players in Kansas, Illinois and Maryland.

No one from North Carolina won the big one. But it wasn't for lack of trying. From Jan. 25 through Thursday, Tar Heel lottery players forked over nearly \$22 million for tickets, hoping to strike it rich.

“It sounds like there was an enormous amount of sales,” said Sarah Ovaska, author of a new report on the North Carolina lottery. “People (who) normally don't buy tickets went out and bought. And people who typically buy tickets bought more.”

That's what state lottery officials like.

“We would like to have a lot of people playing a little rather than a few people playing a lot,” said Van Denton, director of communications for the lottery. “A jackpot like this, with a lot of attention, helps achieve that goal.”

It also provides an opportunity for Ovaska, a researcher for N.C. Policy Watch, a left-leaning think tank in Raleigh that has been critical of the lottery, to look at its impact by counties.

“What we found overall is that counties with the highest (lottery) sales were also counties with the highest poverty rates,” Ovaska said last week.

Those with the highest sales figures — Nash, Halifax, Vance, Wilson, Hyde, Edgecombe, Lenoir, Washington, Martin and Bertie — all are in the eastern part of the state and all but Nash have poverty rates of 20 percent or higher.

Nash, with per capita lottery sales of \$561, had a poverty rate of 15.6 percent.

In Halifax County, for example, per capita sales hit \$516 last year, the second highest in the state and more than twice the total in Guilford.

But Halifax also rates as one of the poorest counties in North Carolina, with 26 percent of its population living in poverty.

Ovaska said she could not explain the geographical disparity.

“In the mountains, we are not seeing those large sales,” she said. “(But) there seems to be a thirst for the lottery in eastern North Carolina.”

Nowhere, likely, is that thirst greater than with Alvin Jones, a 35-year-old newspaper press operator in Halifax County.

Jones told Ovaska that he spends \$100 a day on the North Carolina and Virginia lotteries — that’s \$36,500 a year — and sees nothing wrong with it.

Jones said he uses the money left after he pays his bills to play the lottery.

“I play because I don’t drink, I don’t smoke and I don’t go to clubs,” Jones told Ovaska. “If everyone has to have a habit, that’s my habit.”

Jones said any money that he wins he spends on the lottery.

According to a 2006 study, Ovaska’s report said, nearly 40 percent of those with incomes below \$25,000 see the lottery as their best ticket to wealth.

But Les Bernal, the director of Stop Predatory Gambling, a national organization critical of state-run lotteries, said in the report that such beliefs aren’t based in reality.

“For the government to win,” Bernal said, “citizens have to lose.”

Lottery officials don’t “target any group in our sales nor do we promise riches ... in our advertising,” said Denton, the lottery spokesman. “What we would ask folks to judge us on is the amount of money we raise for education.”

Last year, he said, lottery officials handed over \$447 million to the state for education, the most ever.