

LOTTERY POISED TO ALLOW DEBIT CARD PURCHASES IN 2012

By Kyle Cheney
MASSACHUSETTS STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

BOSTON, DEC. 20, 2011.....Massachusetts Lottery players may soon no longer have to shell out cold, hard cash for scratch tickets and other Lottery products.

The state Lottery Commission is preparing as early as Jan. 1 to permit customers to buy its games of chance with debit cards, a move that Treasurer Steven Grossman, who oversees the Lottery, said would offer convenience, especially in retail stores without ATMs.

"I think it could have a modest, positive impact on sales. I think it's a convenience issue for people," Grossman told reporters after chairing a meeting of the State Lottery Commission Tuesday morning. "This is all about customer service. If you make your customer service absolutely as good as it can be, it's bound to have a positive impact on sales."

Lottery officials said 33 of 42 state lotteries around the country already permit debit card purchases.

"It's the way of the future," said Lottery executive director Paul Sternburg said during the meeting.

Grossman noted that retailers would have to notify customers of the option. Other Lottery officials noted that retailers might need to be educated about the shift in policy to avoid making banned Lottery sales to customers on public assistance and using electronic benefit transfer cards.

The change drew scorn from critics of the Lottery, which generates more than \$4 billion in sales each year, sends about \$900 million a year in profits to cities and towns as local aid, and faces increased competition for the gambling dollar from Bay State casinos.

"The Lottery is aggressively pushing people into deeper personal debt by allowing citizens to use debit cards. The Lottery symbolizes more than any other how government's predatory gambling program has failed," said Les Bernal, executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling. "What essentially is a government program is actively encouraging people to lose money, quote-unquote, as conveniently as possible. Why isn't the Massachusetts treasury encouraging people to save money?"

Members of the Lottery Commission board spoke briefly about the policy change but took no vote on the matter, deferring to Sternburg to make a unilateral decision. Sternburg said he's giving the change some last-minute scrutiny but is eyeing implementation in January.

"My sense is this is the kind of decision I would leave to the executive director and his staff," Grossman said.

Beth Boland, Gov. Deval Patrick's appointee to the five-member Lottery Commission board, said she worried about "data security" for customers who use debit cards.

"We'll have to pay attention," she said.