

# What is N.C. after? Bucks, bucks, bucks!

## Lottery commission steps over (impossible) line with latest ad.

*Charlotte Observer*

Posted: Friday, May. 27, 2011

Oh, how far North Carolina will stoop to attract a few more dollars to its statewide gambling monopoly.

North Carolina's lottery officials are in a pretty tough position. But the law's the law, and you can make a good case that they're breaking it.

To help get the votes to create the lottery, legislators gave lottery officials Alice-in-Wonderland orders: Advertise the lottery in a way that doesn't entice people to play.

True, the entire point of advertising is to sell your product. But the law says "no advertising may have the primary purpose of inducing persons to participate in the lottery."

That provision was designed to placate skeptics who (rightfully) worried about a lottery feeding gambling addictions among people who can't afford them.

Now, six years after it was created, the lottery commission is running TV ads that sure seem enticing to us. A rock band belts out "big bucks, quick bucks, big old bucks, mega bucks." Names like "Jumbo Bucks" and "Bucks, bucks, bucks" scroll along the screen.

Alice Garland, the lottery's executive director, seems to have conflicting opinions. She defends the ad, saying, "We take our lottery law and responsibility for advertising very seriously .... This ad passed our test of not being enticing ..."

But she also pointed out that the lottery is competing for people's discretionary money. "We see advertising as critical to the success of a sales organization, which is what we are," she told News & Observer reporter Rob Christensen.

We understand her dilemma. Effective advertising is crucial to lottery sales, but the law says their advertising is not allowed to be effective. Maybe the law needs to be made more specific, since almost any ad could be perceived as trying to persuade people to play.

But the genesis of that provision is a good one. A lottery is a tax that inherently plays on people's emotions. Studies have shown that lottery ticket sales are highest in poor neighborhoods and that poor people spend a higher percentage of their income on lottery tickets than wealthier people do.

Young people are especially susceptible to gambling addiction, meaning ads targeting them - with, say, rock bands - are particularly offensive.

When the lottery passed under shady circumstances in 2005, this editorial board said this: "Once North Carolina's lottery gets under way, the state will find, as all others have, that public interest declines in time and so will revenues. To boost them, the state will have to become a carnival barker, aggressively enticing citizens to make sucker bets in order to keep the cash flowing. It won't be a pretty sight."

So here we are. Rock bands blurting out "bucks, bucks, bucks" as the state demonstrates that its desire for cash outstrips its respect for its citizens.

Advertising may be crucial to the lottery's success, as executive director Garland says. But the law is clear: The lottery commission needs to take the current ad down.