

Idaho Statesman

Guest Opinion: Slot machines do funny things to governments

BY JONATHAN KRUTZ

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Idaho's constitution plainly prohibits slot machines and any imitation of slot machines. It's funny that Idaho's government allows Idaho's horse tracks, the Idaho Lottery and Idaho's tribes to operate such machines.

To our legislators' credit, they repealed a two-year-old law that permitted historical horse racing machines at tracks. Legislators felt deceived by an Idaho Racing Commission that admitted the machines imitated slots: "They look like slot machines because they're supposed to look like slot machines," said the commission's director. That's funny.

Then, because our governor left himself a choice on April 5 to either sustain or veto the Legislature's repeal, he missed his April 3 constitutional deadline to act, giving up his right to veto, says a Coeur d'Alene Tribe lawsuit. In other words, because on April 5 the governor could easily have chosen to not veto the bill, his power to actually veto the bill had expired. That's really funny.

The tribes are right about the veto, yet their situation is funny, too. They defend tribal slot machines banned by Idaho's constitution (and therefore also by federal law), using a state law that defines their slot machines to not be slot machines — like saying marijuana in cigarette paper is not marijuana. Most governments enforce their constitution. It's funny Idaho's does not.

Meanwhile, since 2011 the Idaho Lottery has spread the same rapid-bet "TouchTabs" machines across Idaho that Iowa banned as slot machines in 2006. These 700-bet-per-hour machines now provide 10 percent of lottery revenues.

The key to all this funny business is not funny at all. Today's rapid-bet video gambling devices — slot machines — have been designed to be addictive far beyond the mechanical one-arm bandits they replaced.

MIT Professor Natasha Shull researched slot machine manufacturing for her book, "Addiction by Design." Shull found that slot designers seek to get players to "gamble to extinction." Designers

evaluate the success of a device by “time on machine” metrics. Old slots hooked gamblers; modern ones are designed to wring them dry.

Addictiveness equals profitability. Even the American Gaming Association admits that today’s rapid-bet slots generate more than 70 percent of casino revenues.

At the heart of the issue, gamblers with an addiction problem provide 30 to 60 percent of slot machine revenues, according to 11 independent studies summarized in the Institute for American Values report, “Why Casinos Matter.” While the AGA says that just 1 percent of Americans has a gambling problem (non-AGA studies show higher levels), they are quiet about how essential those addicts are. One gambler delivered \$500,000 embezzled from the College of Southern Idaho last year. The casino kept the money.

The AGA’s 1 percent figure suggests an Ada County casino would lead 4,000 of our neighbors to struggle with addiction ... to save 271 seasonal racing jobs. That’s not funny at all.

Fundamentally, government should not exploit citizens. Slot machines are toxic. Their design creates a new class of citizens whose single, obsessive focus is to find more funds to gamble. The rest of us pay the price.

There is good news. When the courts uphold the Legislature’s ban, Les Bois Park will close, track owners say. Ada County Commissioners can then consider models from places like Omaha, Neb., and Inglewood and San Mateo, Calif., where failed tracks are being replaced with vibrant housing, business and education centers. That’s serious work for government.

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