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Idaho leads national backlash against gambling expansion

By Grant Ipsen

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Three big issues are driving a national backlash against legalized gambling — and Idaho leads the way. When our legislature voted overwhelmingly to ban historical horse racing slot machines this year, it was the country's biggest reaction against gambling since South Carolina shut down 30,000 slots in 2001. Fittingly, the machines stopped ringing just a few days before the National Day of Action of the non-partisan Stop Predatory Gambling Foundation.

Our legislators' votes upheld the Idaho Constitution, which clearly says that neither slot machines nor any imitations are legal in Idaho. The debate highlighted three major issues that gambling promoters cannot address.

First, gambling specifically and deliberately targets gambling addicts and depends on addicts to be profitable. The addicts are few, but they provide as much as two-thirds of the revenue that flows through slots, according to 11 studies summarized in the national report "Why Casinos Matter." Slot addictiveness comes from their rapid betting speed, reports MIT's Natasha Shull.

Gambling promoters talk of 80 jobs lost because Les Bois Park can no longer subsidize operations with illegal slot machines. Promoters don't mention that those jobs are financed by hundreds of Idaho gamblers whose lives are destroyed by addiction, or that each addict affects up to 17 others — family, friends, relatives, coworkers and employers. Gambling's negative effects rip through our communities.

Second, gambling hurts local economies. It brings no new dollars to an area, it just sucks money away. "Local business will suffer because they'll lose customer dollars to the casino," Donald Trump said in Florida. A casino "creates a measurable drain" on a city's economy, concluded an Iowa sales tax study.

In addition, gambling adds heavy economic costs for law enforcement, welfare, unemployment, health and embezzlement-undermined businesses. Every dollar that comes into the state adds three dollars in taxpayer costs, according to Baylor economist Earl Grinols.

Last month, a Nebraska gambler pleaded guilty to embezzling \$14 million from Medicaid, most of which was gambled away. The College of Southern Idaho recently reported a similar \$500,000 embezzlement. Those government funds disappeared.

Third, gambling undermines sound government decision-making, as Idaho's horse slot experience illustrates. State officials responsible for oversight instead joined gambling promoters to mislead legislators into believing their machines were just a form of racing. The Racing Commission chair inadvertently admitted the constitutional violation when he said, "they look like slot machines because they are supposed to look like slot machines."

Idaho's tribal slot machines are a great example, too. Federal law requires tribes to respect state law with regard to gambling. But Idaho's government allows the machines because a statute "defines" tribal slot machines — which are advertised as slot machines — to not be slot machines. When a statute trumps the Constitution, the rule of law is undermined.

And then there's the lottery, whose officials are told to maximize revenues. The addictive speed of slot machines does just that. Over the past few years the lottery, with no clear public notice or hearings, has quietly placed TouchTab machines in neighborhoods across the state.

Do they imitate slot machines? At a bet every few seconds, of course they do. States should "cease and roll back" such rapid-bet neighborhood gambling, concluded Congress' big 1999 gambling study.

Like the Racing Commission, the Idaho Lottery has joined the gambling companies it is supposed to regulate and enacted unconstitutional public policy changes in Idaho. That's what gambling does — and why state-sponsored gambling is a failed government policy.

** Former State Senator Grant Ipsen is chair of Stop Predatory Gambling Idaho, the state chapter of SPGF.*