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Comments about 'Why a Utah lottery is not in the cards anytime soon'

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By Dennis Romboy, Deseret News

Published: Wednesday, Jan. 13 2016 4:25 p.m. MST

SALT LAKE CITY — Utahns flocking to Idaho or Wyoming might have a better chance to win the \$1.5 billion Powerball jackpot than the Beehive State has for running its own lottery.

Even before Utah became a state 120 years ago this month, early leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints made it clear gambling wasn't welcome.

Nothing has changed.

Utah is one of two states that prohibits all forms of gambling, and it is among six states that don't have a government-sanctioned lottery. And other than a few online petitions and calls for Utah to "grow up," there have been no serious efforts over the years to change the Utah Constitution to make way for Powerball or Mega Millions.

"I would suggest that any wise legislator or any wise governor would shoot it down immediately," said Joseph Rust, a longtime Salt Lake attorney who studies gambling issues.

Legalizing any kind of gambling in the state would pave the way for Native American tribes in Utah to open casinos, Rust said.

Federal law in 1988 recognized the right of Indian tribes to build casinos or other gambling establishments on their reservations, as long as the state where they are located has some form of legalized gambling.

"You would have slot machines in Fort Duchesne and down in the Four Corners area overnight," he said. "That would introduce this whole thing of widespread gambling into Utah."

A proposed amendment to the Utah Constitution takes a two-thirds majority vote from both the House and Senate to get on the general election ballot.

Sen. Lyle Hillyard, R-Logan, said the odds are slim to none that lawmakers would do that for a lottery, though if they did place it before voters, "it may very well pass."

The veteran Senate budget chairman, though, would oppose a lottery measure at either stage.

"Does it really generate all this free money or does it bring all these social problems with it?" he said.

Rust sees state-run lotteries as a "deceitful policy" that hurts poor people and fails economically. The state, he said, is better to raise taxes for education or roads so everyone pays a fair share and it doesn't burden the needy.

"It's not as popular, but it's a safer way," he said.

Rust said he'd like to show multimillion dollar lottery winners a picture of all the "poor people" standing in line for tickets to let them see who the money comes from.

"That image nobody talks about," he said.

Les Bernal, executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling, said there are several reasons why Utah is better off without a lottery. The nonprofit group, based in Washington, D.C., opposes state lotteries and casinos.

The state's economy is stronger and there are more jobs because people aren't spending their discretionary income on something that has no economic impact, he said.

State government finances are healthier without a lottery, Bernal said, adding that state-sponsored gambling worsens budget deficits over the long term. Also, he said residents end up paying higher taxes for fewer services.

"It's the biggest budget gimmick there is," he said.

The state, Bernal said, also has less financial inequality than states with lotteries.

"Utah, to its credit, is not actively cheating and exploiting its own citizens. There's no debate that much of the revenue this collected from lotteries falls on those who are the most financially desperate in society. You have less barriers for a middle class life in Utah today because you don't have a lottery," he said.

Bernal said it's also more than just a coincidence that Utahns lead the nation in charitable giving. Gambling, he said, creates a culture of greed and selfishness and undermines the ethic of caring about other people.