

The Brockton Enterprise

OUR OPINION: Lottery should help fix gambling problem

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Posted May. 26, 2016 at 5:00 AM

The numbers don't lie: Massachusetts has a big gambling problem – to the tune of \$5 billion spent on lottery tickets in fiscal 2015. That translates to an astonishing per-capita lottery ticket sales figure: \$2 per person per day.

Some consider the lottery a voluntary tax on the poor – and, in many cases, those who can least afford it may take a chance on lottery tickets. But heavy lottery sales are not limited to poor cities.

Take, for instance, Abington, West Bridgewater and Swansea. At \$1,920, Abington was No. 3 among the state's 351 cities and towns in terms of per capita lottery sales. West Bridgewater was No. 2 and Swansea was No. 43.

While the Massachusetts Lottery is among the most successful in the nation and boasts more payouts than most, all the money spent on games of chance also comes with a lot of baggage, particularly when lottery tickets are bought by poor people who are desperate for a windfall, addicted to gambling or both.

Problem gambling can lead to a wide range of financial, family and mental distress, and can also lead to crime. With new "big ticket" lottery products, like \$30 scratch tickets, they can become, as Les Bernal of the group Stop Predatory Gambling says, "a Hail Mary investment strategy for poor people." That strategy is not likely to work out too well.

Whether the societal costs to our cities and towns outweigh the benefits of the lottery – which is expected to return \$1 billion in unrestricted funds to cities and towns – is debatable.

The formula for the distribution of lottery funds also seems to be inherently unfair, as it is based on population and median home values in each community, rather than the lottery sales in each. Changing the local aid formula for lottery revenue may be a way to return more money to the communities that generate the most lottery sales. Indeed, these communities may need more resources to keep up with the associated societal costs.

Just as the Massachusetts Expanded Gambling Law has mandated mitigation measures to study the effects of problem gambling and requires greater access to gambling addiction treatment programs, it is time for the Massachusetts Lottery to similarly dedicate a greater share of its revenues to prevent and treat gambling addiction, in a manner similar to its effective and aggressive marketing campaigns.

Officials ought to see to it that the Lottery upholds its public mission and pays its fair share for the damage that its products can cause. It's time to admit Massachusetts has a problem – and try to fix it.

Here's one opinion. What's yours?