

Stick 'Em Up, I'm The One-Armed Bandit

Written by Jeff Davis

Monday, 20 October 2008 20:33 - Last Updated Friday, 31 October 2008 08:21

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by Jeff Davis (jdavis@appindie.org)

They was waitin'

To get their hands on some easy money....She could almost taste that easy money.

Listen, Sam, how'd ya like to make some easy money ?He say, Yes! Oh yes! Jus' tell me what you want me to do...

The easier it looks

The hotter it hooks

There ain't no such thing as easy money.

(Lyrics from the song *Easy Money*, written by Rickie Lee Jones)

Just like the thistles that perennially pop up along the roadsides near my house, the prickly issue of slot machines comes around every year. In the past the Maryland legislature has debated this contentious issue and repeatedly voted it down. I suppose that they have tired of rehashing the controversy, for this year it is being put forth to state-wide voters as an election day referendum.

On the face of it, when reading the wording of the referendum, voting for slots seems to be something of a no-brainer. Who in their right mind would be against a proposal that is purported to bring in a whopping \$600 million a year for the education of our children? It makes it appear that if you are against the plan for slots, then you are going to short-change our students and their futures in the face of an increasingly difficult economic environment.

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But perhaps not is all it seems on the surface, for lurking below there may be a many-headed monster just waiting to bite us in ways we have not fully considered.

There are a number of people adamantly opposed to slots simply because it is gambling, and for them this is a moral issue that makes it a given vote of no. For most of us, however, the basic concept of gambling is not seen in moral terms; after all, our society is already inundated with different ways of playing the odds: we have the Maryland State Lottery, non-profits bingo, tip jars, and numerous raffles. The excitement of risking your money for the chance to walk away with your pockets lined with greenbacks carries a tremendous allure, for even if you come up empty-handed, there is the thrill derived from an activity surely as ancient as the world's oldest profession.



So what are the pros and cons of this issue that might influence how you vote next month?

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The angel whispering in your ear says:

State coffers will have \$600 million a year to be spent specifically on education.

Construction of the slots sites, and workers to run them, will provide much needed jobs.

Money will go to help the Maryland race horse industry stay in business.

The revenues will help prevent the need to raise taxes.

But the devil whispering in your opposite ear says:

There are studies that have looked at the potential amount of money that would go to education, with the resulting opinion that \$600 million is way too optimistic. Our economy is in trouble and is predicted to take quite some time to recover; as a result, money spent on slots is likely to go down. There is also no certainty that there would be 15,000 of the machines taking in money, as the state has legislated that Anne Arundel County, where 1/3 of the machines are to be placed, has control over zoning for them, and it is far from a shoo-in that they will even be permitted.

The state will be giving away 1/6 of the slots money to the racing industry, estimated to be a stupendous \$100 million a year, with eighty per cent of that going to out of state owners. Why

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should our state be in the business of subsidizing private enterprises, especially when the benefits go elsewhere?

There are the hidden costs to society of dealing with the increase in problems of gambling addiction. Studies repeatedly have shown that many of the people who gamble the most are the least likely to be able to afford it. Money spent on gambling often takes from money needed for family essentials. In addition, the areas around gambling venues have been shown to have increased crime, traffic problems, and often an influx of prostitution.

Whatever amount of money goes to education does not necessarily guarantee that the overall education budget will go up. What is to prevent our legislators from simply cutting other money from the school budget, transferring it to the general fund, and spending it elsewhere? Wouldn't this undermine the basic premise of why we are supposed to support the referendum?

Do we really want to turn Rocky Gap into a gambling destination? Why should we allow the slots venues to be on state property? If it's okay, why shouldn't windmills be allowed on state property as well? Why should there be only five sites permitted? In accordance with how the profits are to be split up, 40% goes to the private casino owners, to the tune of \$450 million a year. Why should a gift-horse hand-out be restricted to only five sites? Is this anything but as a result of lobbying interests (think Cas Taylor as a prime example)?

The money generated is without question a hidden tax. As a society do we want to use gamblers to fill the gap in our state budget, or would it be better to spread the fiscal responsibility amongst all of the citizens of our state? Should we agree with the chief executive of Montgomery County who endorsed slots because he is concerned that "without them taxes may be raised, and that it would impact the wealthiest county in the state the hardest?" (Washington Post)

For me, the true no brainer is that there are far too many negative aspects for this referendum to deserve passage. Gilding the pockets of a chosen few, adding no certainty that education will really benefit, equals an emphatic = **Just Vote No** to slots.

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