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Published January 17, 2007 07:02 pm - We believe: The gambling machines proposed by Rep. Terri Austin for Hoosier Park would be a boon to local and state budgets.

Legalize 'cherry masters'

Lawmakers are looking to make Indiana a haven for more gambling. Last week Rep. Terri Austin introduced House Bill No. 1440 to make video gambling machines legal at Hoosier Park and Indiana Downs. Austin, along with local Reps. Scott Reske, Jack Lutz and Sen. Tim Lanane have all come out in favor of the machines.

Austin's bill calls for 32 cents of every dollar to go to the state with an estimated \$150 million available for full-day kindergarten. Five percent of the tax collected will go to Madison County with Anderson due to receive 35 percent.

There is serious money available to the state if this bill passes. House Speaker Patrick Bauer guarantees it a committee hearing but doubts it will pass. Gov. Mitch Daniels has expressed concern about expanding gambling in the Hoosier state. This is unfortunate. This newspaper has long argued that the benefits from the video gambling machines, increased revenue, outweigh concerns about expansive gambling.

Bill 1440 will make its journey this spring, but the backer of another bill is backing off. Rep. Win Moses, D-Fort Wayne, told The Associated Press that he won't push for legislation to legalize and regulate video gambling machines in bars.

Moses' rationale for withholding the bill is that he has no consensus. Bauer called this legislation a "long shot" and added this: "(The machines) would be virtually everywhere, on every city block, and that's a huge problem that I don't think people fully understand. You triple the gambling you already have."

Moses, who favors legalizing machines, said they would generate \$200 million in tax revenue for the state.

The machines, sometimes called "cherry masters," would indeed be omnipresent, but they are going to be anyway. Now, all the money is pocketed by whoever owns them and the state gets nothing.

We cannot continue to act like an ostrich and bury our heads in the sand by saying we don't want gambling or expanded gambling. It already exists in an unregulated and untaxed form.

We remember the amount of money involved in the alleged empire of John Neal, who was arrested last fall on racketeering charges. The machines are a boon to bar owners and police have to turn a blind eye in order for the machines to keep operating.

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It's like Prohibition when sales of alcohol went underground and mobsters made huge money selling their drinks in speakeasies.

No, the state needs to make the "cherry masters" legal and spread the revenue in education and other state projects. Additionally, some of those funds could be used to assist problem gamblers who aren't noticed with the current corrupt gambling that exists in every community throughout the state. Legalizing could actually become a deterrent to crime.

There are those who will protest about expanding gambling, but it's going to go on anyway. Making the machines legal is a pragmatic approach to the state's fiscal health.



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