

# Oregon lottery: Let's wean ourselves from our addiction

By **Guest Columnist**

The Oregonian, November 06, 2009, 9:30AM



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The Oregonian's recent article on the state lottery and compensation for retailers ("As sales tank, lottery and bars locked in mutual dependence," Oct. 28) poses a timely opportunity to raise important questions about the future of the Oregon Lottery.

In spite of the revenue the Oregon Lottery generates, its human costs far exceed its fiscal benefits. First and foremost are the costs associated with problem gambling. A 2006 study found that more than 74,000 adult Oregonians meet the criteria of current problem or pathological gamblers and that 5.9 percent of Oregon youths were either problem gamblers or at-risk gamblers.

The effects of problem gambling, like other addictions, are widespread and include child abuse, domestic violence, crime, suicide and depression, not to mention family debt and bankruptcy.

Too many Oregon families watch loved ones destroy their lives even unto death because of gambling addictions. Too many Oregon businesses, churches, nonprofits and government agencies have been victimized by people (victims themselves) whose gambling addictions lead them to steal from their workplace. More than one in three (36 percent) of clients in Oregon's gambling treatment programs reported committing illegal acts to finance their gambling.

But it is also troubling that state government itself is contributing to the growth of a gambling-crazed culture. Each year the Oregon Lottery spends \$9 million to \$10 million to promote an activity that drains funds from increasingly hard-hit working Oregonians. The state of Oregon expands lottery revenues through promoting new games and expanding video lottery outlets -- the crack cocaine of gambling addiction.

In the private sector, the state's reliance on gambling revenue is creating another type of dependency. As Bob Whelan from ECONorthwest pointed out in The Oregonian's article, many bars and taverns that act as Oregon Lottery outlets can no longer envision a business model separate from the lottery. As Whelan noted, "The subsidizing of their operations has become integral to their survival."

The lottery has also become a diversionary force, tabling the lasting work of real revenue reform and economic development. Furthermore, incessant advertising and the influx of more highly addictive online games and seasonal raffles have led to a frenzied pitch. The state's marketing campaign can be summed up as "Buy, baby, buy -- gambling is good for Oregon!" The Oregon Lottery is simply not one of the state's "best practices."

What we should be focusing on is phasing out the lottery and phasing in real substantive revenue reform. Done well, the results of such reform would ensure a tax system that would support the public ends that we care about in ways that are sustainable, dignified and not full of contradictions and immense human and community costs.

So now is the time for us to admit our addiction and begin the process of rehabilitation. By doing so, we can begin moving toward a more healthy way of living that will help Oregon be the best state it can be in service to all Oregonians.

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