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editorial

A bad gamble for higher ed

Rather than expand gambling, state lawmakers should seek more direct funding for Colorado's universities and colleges.

By The Denver Post

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An effort to ask Colorado voters to help fund higher education through the use of video poker and keno machines is poor public policy and should be abandoned.

Yes, the financial situation facing higher education is dire.

The recession and slow recovery have hammered state tax collections.

The federal stimulus money that has back-filled a \$377 million cut in state support of universities is set to dry up in fiscal year 2011-12.

So far, nothing is on tap to replace that shortfall, and more major cuts are expected.

Sen. Chris Romer, D-Denver, has proposed to

put on the 2010 ballot a measure that would allow video keno at restaurants and bars, and video lottery machines, such as video poker, at the state fair grounds in Pueblo. The state's revenue from those games would be dedicated to a fund bolstering higher education.

Romer's idea is to use that fund to back a bond sale. Projections suggest that with the new games, the state could support a bond sale of between \$300 million and \$500 million, which would significantly help repair higher education funding.

To win support from the gambling industry in Black Hawk, Central City and Cripple Creek, which fears that any expansion of gambling elsewhere in the state could hurt its core business, Romer and other Senate leaders are crafting a bill that would grant the industry significant future protections.

As Colorado's lottery law currently exists, the governor or the legislature could authorize video lottery terminals throughout the state. Romer's idea is to try to pass a bill that would remove that language from the lottery law in exchange for a promise from the industry to support the keno ballot item.

The bill also would prevent an expansion of video lottery terminals at dog and horse racing tracks, except for Pueblo's.

If Romer could achieve the agreement with the gambling industry, convince lawmakers to pass

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the needed bills, and win over enough voters come November — a tall order — then higher education funding could be largely saved from further reductions.

Moreover, the state could get \$60 million a year going forward to put toward scholarships or other educational grants.

Lawmakers who support the move no doubt understand how desperate the attempt appears. But they apparently have no appetite for asking voters simply to agree to increase the state's tax revenue to support higher education.

We don't support expanded gambling in Colorado because we are philosophically opposed to what amounts to a glittery tax on those who often can't afford it.

We would rather see voters presented with a compelling argument for supporting higher education more directly, and a ballot proposal that would serve that purpose.

Finally, attempting to dramatically change gambling law in Colorado in the final weeks of the legislative session strikes us as unwise. Laws enacted in haste are often flawed.

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