

Racino bill would silence people's voice

● Amending last fall's slot machine decision could also deprive Greater Bangor of a much-needed source of revenue.

By TOM SMITH

The Democrats campaigning for president may be battling it out across the country, but the state of Maine is embroiled in a not-so-democratic race of its own. The issue: whether the government has the right to overturn the majority's decision to have slot machines at the Bangor Historic Raceway.

When we went to the polls last Nov. 4, we did so with faith in the democratic process. We believed our votes would count.

Apparently, so did 61 percent of Maine residents, according to the Citizens' Committee's independent poll last month. They agree with us that the lawmakers in Augusta should leave Question 2 alone.

We, like many of our friends and neighbors, voted in favor of slot machines at the state's harness racing tracks. Certainly, the proposed racetrack development will help to revitalize the harness racing industry in Maine. But it will also provide a significant boost to our local economy, especially in Greater Bangor. According to newspaper accounts, the slot machines alone are projected to bring in an annual gross revenue of \$75 million and create more than 300 jobs. In total, the racino would create an annual jackpot of more than \$95 million for the Greater Bangor economy.

Yet a legislative committee

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continues to discuss whether to override the people's vote in favor of a 39-page bill that would essentially erase the results of the November election and impose stricter regulations on the racino. The new proposal would establish a gambling regulatory board and tighten slot machine regulations, ultimately reducing the revenue the city and county earn from the racino.

No one denies the racino should be regulated, just as the casinos and racetracks in Connecticut, New Jersey and Nevada are. The trouble is that the citizens of Maine already agreed how their racino should be regulated in the initial referendum.

One of the reasons voters approved slot machine development is that it will stimulate more peripheral jobs within the Bangor community. By requiring expensive gaming licenses for anyone selling goods to the track, the bill would actually discourage vendors from doing business there. Certainly, this outcome does not reflect the will of the people.

The new bill also proposes to increase and reallocate the existing 25 percent slot machine revenue tax. Yet when they voted on the referendum, the majority of Maine citizens approved the use of these funds to support the harness racing industry; prescription drugs for the elderly and disabled; scholarships for Maine students; agricultural fairs like Fryeburg and Cumberland and the local



Slot machines here could pump \$95 million a year into the Greater Bangor economy.

Associated Press
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Bangor economy. If, as proposed by the new legislation, these funds were redistributed, they would go into state coffers to support causes with which neither I nor other Maine voters agreed.

The manipulation of an approved referendum is of grave concern. By proposing such drastic amendments to the racino law, the state would essentially be overturning legislation that was passed by 53 percent of its voters. This action not only thwarts the efforts of Maine citizens to get out and vote for issues they care about, but it also undermines the democratic process and challenges all that our state – and America – stand for.

Right now, our country is in the midst of a presidential campaign. Every day on the news, we hear about caucuses, polls and primaries – those essential ingredients in the democratic process. We, and the politicians vying for the privilege of leading us, pay close attention to those voices of the people, for they are the

lifeblood of our country. What entitles our state's elected officials to rescind our right to vote, to elect our own officials and approve our own laws by drastically altering the legislation we approved?

Whether or not you voted for slot machines, you must question the legislative process at work here. By attempting to radically amend the law that Maine voters supported, the government is essentially rendering mute the will of the people. The real issue at hand is not whether to have slot machines at the track, but whether your next vote in this state – whether it be on slot machines, school taxes, property-tax laws or unemployment benefits – will count.

When we went to the polls in November, we believed that we were exercising our democratic right to make our voices heard. Our leaders in Augusta – just like those in Washington – have the obligation to listen.

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