Like the song lyrics from The Music Man, we’ve got “terrible, terrible trouble” ... now that we have a lottery in Tennessee.
I voted in November 2002 to maintain the restriction in the Tennessee Constitution prohibiting gambling. My ballot and those of hundreds of thousands of other Tennessee citizens reflected a positive action to keep Tennessee “Gambling Free.” This campaign resulted in a nearly 20-year subliminal and intentional effort to legalize gambling in one of only three gambling-free states.

Now, a mere three months into the great gambling venture in the Volunteer State, a myriad of concerns and dilemmas plagues a growing number of our state citizens.

Soon an appeal for the success and even “virtue” of the experiment will be paraded under the banner of positive statistics in an attempt to justify the actions of November 5, 2002, and the subsequent rush to play the risk game. Actually, no set of numbers can tell the true story of legalized gambling in its freshman year in Tennessee. The announcement of this actual saga of sorrow is etched more indelibly in the faces of the victims of gambling day by day, if not hour by hour. Following are some scenarios.

Timidly, the lady ordered her lottery tickets and gently pushed a 20-dollar bill toward the convenience store attendant with her right hand while cradling an infant in her left arm. Then I watched two little girls dance around their mama to the chorus, “Give me my ticket; give me my ticket!” Each child hastily scratched the lottery card and cried again, “Mama, did we win? Mama, did we win?” They were too young to know for themselves. “No, no, we didn’t win,” reported Mama, as she handed the waiting attendant food stamps to pay for the half gallon of milk, loaf of bread, and dozen eggs. As the dejected children walked out of the store, one child in tears asked, “Mama, will we ever win?”

According to their pastor, the newlyweds possessed no credit rating but benefited greatly from Uncle Ned’s offer to finance the small house they purchased from him in the fall of 2002. Promptly, the couple made their payment on the first day of each month prior to March 2004. Patiently, the uncle waited beyond the grace period and finally dropped by to see his nephew. The young man volunteered to his family member, “I can’t pay you this month. I’ve already spent the money buying lottery tickets.” Soon the broken trust would spread throughout the close family.

In good faith, I handed a five-dollar bill to a disheveled man holding a sign, “Homeless, need to eat.” Clutching my gift, he laughed, “This will buy me five lottery tickets.”

Following a succession of lottery-only customers, the saleslady seemed to welcome my purchases and remarked, “My job sure has changed; every day I handle wasted money from people who can’t afford to waste any.”

Because I bear strong feelings and deep convictions against any form of gambling, I write yet another article concerning the lottery, even after the fact. I possess an ongoing responsibility to raise my voice on behalf of the victims of “legal gambling,” and if I ignore the ever-widening range of consequences from the growing gambling fetish, I contribute to the apathy that licensed this mess in the first place. Now, opting against silence, I market my views through the use of several familiar Tennessee expressions.

The Volunteers Bought a Pig in a Poke

I applaud the advocates of gambling and proponents of education through luck. They maintained an excellent selling tactic combining simplicity, emotion, and focus. This “victory” for gambling crowned another triumph for secularism through the extension of another “liberty” to afflict a permissive society.

Apathy nurtured the entire decision-making season for the lottery. Morally, many bought into the belief that games of chance would not in any way adversely affect them. Besides, some folks in a state formerly cordoned off from gambling winked at the intrigue of a lucky venture or the rush of risk. Meanwhile, the stage opened for an era of disassociation between earnings and wise use of income. Subsequently, in November 2002, citizens of the state of Tennessee bought a pig in a poke.

This phrase, possibly unknown to a younger generation, refers to the unwise practice of purchasing a pig “sight unseen.” Such a practice often resulted in startling surprises including a sick pig or even a dead hog.

Now the pig has been purchased, the sack is open, and the contents are spilling out. Originally the expectation and understanding of the lottery proposal by rank-and-file Tennesseans focused on the limited activity of simply purchasing tickets, awarding prizes, and advancing the cause of education by enabling a multitude of students to attend college and attain wisdom and gradually improving other areas of public education.

During the implementation period here in “lottery wonderland,” the professionals bombarded the citizens of the state with announcements of enormous salaries, intricate organization, and continual legalization of additional attractive ways to gamble while debating who would qualify for scholarships. Citizens awak-
ened to the realization of how minute a portion of the money would ever benefit education. Now, no longer do we have to look into the sack. Surprise, the gambling monster is out!

Too Late to Close the Barn Door?

The question mark broadcasts my reluctance yet to offer any assumption or conclusion in order to appeal to good common-sense ethics. In other words, I refuse to scuttle total hope even in light of several disappointing and despairing realities.

The Tennessee General Assembly must bear the responsibility of contributing to the expansion of gambling and its resultant ill effects on Tennesseans. A legislative body holds the right and privilege to protect society from harm, even self-harm. Laws establish due process, rights, and, yes, even limits. When both houses of the General Assembly concurred to opt to withdraw the constitutional restraint on gambling, the body chose to initiate the creation of the corps of losers. Gambling exists to perpetuate losers. Gambling thrives on losers. Losers guarantee the presence and future of gambling. Whether folks purchase raffle tickets, bet on rubber ducks, waltz to a cakewalk, pull a slot lever, or scratch off a ticket, the majority will always lose. This reality signals the intention of the gambling organization. A governmental action should benefit the populace and never foster a debilitating, self-depreciating clientele of losers. Generations of past Tennessee lawmakers honored the wisdom of maintaining closed doors to organized gambling. Somewhere, somehow, someone abandoned the heritage of the law-making sages of generations of the corps of losers. Gambling exists to perpetuate losers. Gambling thrives on losers.

Now, Who Will Bell the Cat?

Yes, one more question. Take a look across beautiful Tennessee. Try to envision mountains, valleys, lush meadows, meandering streams. Such views come readily to mind. Such a perception never registers with the movers and shakers of the gambling industry. Assuredly, we have only seen a small glimpse of what they envision in a fresh gambling state. Geographically, several locations stand strategically ready to evolve into gambling meccas. Major interstates cross in Knoxville, potentially delivering a growing army of gamblers to East Tennessee. Both Reno and Las Vegas strongly market their neon, get-rich-quick promise to the American family.

What natural attraction beckons the family more than the Great Smoky Mountains? Already, the fun resorts await children, and casinos could easily move in next door. How long will our natural state treasures prevail against the encroachments of the lure of the luck shops? More to the point, who will cry “Enough!”?

Gambling, once born, quickly incubates and more quickly matures into predatory adulthood. This reality in Tennessee finds much more affirmation through a state gambling commission licensed to saturate the state with gambling opportunities and innovative ways to bet, pushing any envelope of restraint. Already, even feeble cries of warning about gambling addiction have met with great resistance and, more tragically, ridicule.

Gambling activity resembles a living organism and requires constant feeding. The nourishment consists of new gamblers and “seasoned veterans” attracted to a constant array of new ways to bet.

But what if a groundswell of recognition of irresponsibility and the need for limits begins to move across this state? Consider, though, a more pressing question: Could a legislative process that offers a roadkill bill, debates a leash law for dogs in pick-up trucks, and repeals a motorcycle helmet restriction effectively police an ever-growing gambling industry? Such a track record does not promise hope to the people of Tennessee.

Third Mouse at the Ark Door

A simple commentary may be offered concerning this lonely rodent: he was out of luck. During the Keep Tennessee Gambling Free campaign, I recall one gentleman who noted, “I came to Tennessee to get away from gambling.” Now all of Tennessee lives inside the luck business, and unlike the forlorn mouse we can’t get out of the luck business.

Near the end of the Keep Tennessee Gambling Free campaign, I experienced a growing conviction that if Tennesseans legalized gambling much of our populace’s wise decision-making on moral issues would diminish and even become jeopardized. Currently, the long list of crucial life issues including abortion and same-sex marriage moving through the legislative process lends credence to this conviction. Proponents of these issues hold dear in remembrance their perception that Tennesseans chose not to stand against gambling. So, once again, are we out of luck?

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