

# Don't gamble with city's future

By SHEILA DIXON

WHEN I have to make difficult budget decisions for Baltimore's residents, I don't always have the luxury to think only of the numbers; I have to consider the human face of these issues.

As the fate of slot machine legislation unfolds in Annapolis, my main concern as City Council president is the health, education and welfare of the people of Baltimore. What will be the day-to-day impact of slot machines on struggling city residents who will pay the price for this legislation?

Implementing slots without careful consideration could have a devastating impact on the quality of life in Baltimore.

I am concerned about the Baltimore residents who will be affected by having slot machines in their neighborhoods.

How will Pimlico residents contend with the additional crime that comes with gambling? Will slots encourage addictive behavior? How will Northwest Baltimore look with more traffic jams, more trash? Do we want our children's education dollars to be at the mercy of slots revenue? And what good will that revenue do if it creates additional expenses, jeopardizes stable neighborhoods and reverses the progress of struggling neighborhoods in the city?

Baltimore is on the verge of a renaissance, and I do not want to see it facing more addiction problems. I sponsored and fought hard for legislation to eliminate alcohol and tobacco billboards because I didn't want to see Baltimore's addicted population become more victimized than they are. We will be taking two steps backward if we allow gambling interests to wreak havoc on Baltimore residents.

I am also concerned that people who live near the racetracks will have to bear an unequal share of the burden of slots. It is unfair to balance the state budget on the backs of the people of Pimlico, Park Heights, Cylburn and Mount Washington.

In most jurisdictions around the country where gambling has been introduced, communities have experienced increases in personal bankruptcies, higher incidences of crimes such as prostitution and rape, and business failures. The potential impact of slots on Baltimore's crime rate is disturbing.

Nationwide, counties with casinos experience eight times more crime

than counties without casinos. Atlantic City, N.J., experienced a 107 percent rise in crime after it legalized gambling.

In Baltimore, the police already face challenges keeping drug turf wars from escalating. What will happen if slot machine gambling is added to the picture and we have organized crime, with real heavy hitters, to contend with? Will the money we receive from the tracks be enough to offset the additional police and infrastructure expenditures that will be required? I don't like those odds very much.

There are more reasonable alternative revenue sources that can be used to address the budget deficit. This state budget is going to have to include some tax increases. They could be temporary to tide the state over until the economy improves.

Most estimates project that a 1 percent increase in the state sales tax would bring in between \$500 and \$600 million a year.

Other measures being considered such as a tax on professional services and increases in corporate and property taxes would raise much-needed

revenue without slots.

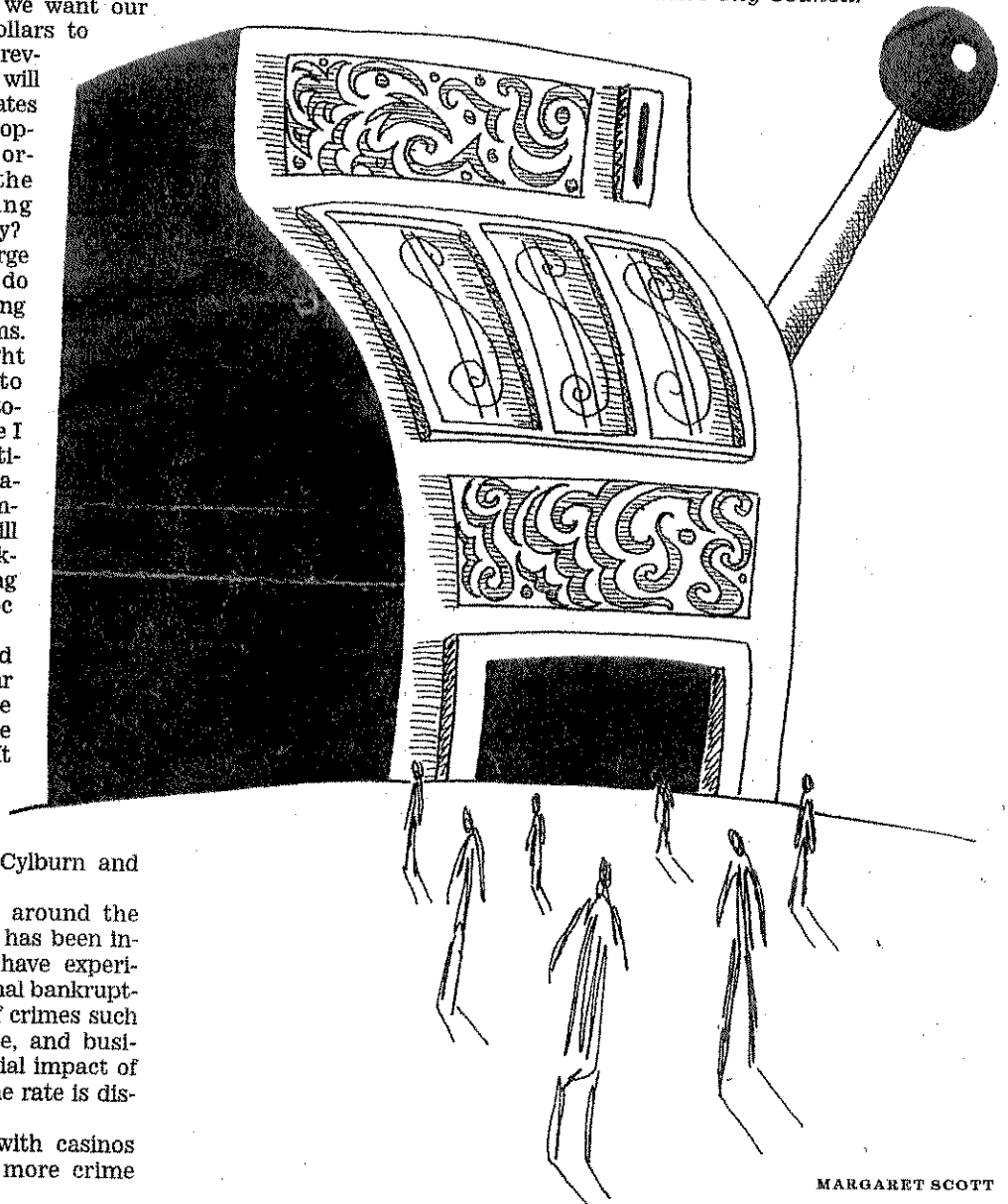
Tax revenue is relatively easy to predict, but we simply have no way of knowing whether slots would be a reliable revenue source. I think it is unwise to put education funding at the mercy of uncertain slots revenue.

And slots would be expensive for Baltimore. Preliminary estimates show that introducing slots would cost the city \$9.3 million in new annual operating costs and more than \$65 million in road construction and improvement costs. Unless state lawmakers are prepared to address these costs, Baltimore cannot afford slots.

I urge our representatives in Annapolis to resist slots as being the only solution to the state budget crisis. Let Maryland be the one state that does its homework before embracing slots so we can avoid the problems that have taken place in Atlantic City and elsewhere.

Debate slots in the next session. Don't rush this through the legislature at the 11th hour. Too much is at stake.

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