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The fight about whether to have gambling in Iowa is over. Some of the staunchest opponents of casinos say they

have given up trying to expel an industry that employs nearly 10,000 people and antes up more than \$300 million a year in state and local taxes.

That doesn't mean the argument is finished. Gambling sparked one of the fiercest exchanges in last week's gubernatorial debate.

Gov. Chet Culver, the Democratic incumbent, is willing to expand gambling. He thinks communities that want casinos should have them. The Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission has repeatedly turned down a license for Ottumwa. It also rejected proposals from Fort Dodge and Tama earlier this year. Culver has not threatened to remove commissioners who disagreed with him.

Former Gov. Terry Branstad, the Republican challenger, thinks Iowa has enough casinos. He has supported keeping control of license decisions with the commission. He also has appointed gaming regulators in the past who refused to consider new licenses. He would review commissioners if elected, according to his campaign, but he hasn't said whether he'd impose a litmus test.

Expect candidates to forever argue how much gambling Iowa wants or needs.

We could settle one recurring debate, however. It's time to allow established casinos to operate without seeking voter approval every eight years. Keep an automatic vote in place for a period of time after a new license is granted and after any change in casino ownership or management. Allow voters the right to petition for a referendum, as a safety valve in case an operation goes downhill or public sentiment turns around.

Iowa requires no other business to petition voters every eight years to remain in existence.

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Casinos aren't like every other business, of course. They are heavily regulated and taxed, and that's appropriate.

But they're also facing an increasingly competitive environment, as regulators add more casinos. Like other businesses, they need the ability to grow and change. They need to redecorate and add amenities like conference centers and water parks. Some have built parking garages. Many of the casinos have managed to do so despite the existing law. But casino operators have often said their creditors are reluctant to invest in improvements when they face yet another vote in a few years.

Iowa has benefited enormously from having a generally healthy and well-run casino industry. State government has been able to continue investment in infrastructure because of the revenue, much of it from out-of-state visitors. Local communities and nonprofit groups statewide get a share of the money.

Many of the fears about gambling in Iowa have not materialized. State regulators have succeeded in keeping out organized crime. The overall character and reputation of Iowa as a wholesome and hardworking state have not dimmed in the glare of bright casino lights. The recent scandal over campaign donations from casino operators is not, as Branstad is trying to suggest, evidence of widespread corruption. In fact, it shows that law enforcement is working to keep the industry clean.

There have been downsides to casinos. Gambling addiction may affect a small minority of patrons, but it remains a serious concern because of its potential to devastate families. Competition from casinos no doubt has affected other entertainment venues in their communities. Community nonprofits with access to gaming revenue can address ways to combat dependency and aid Main Street businesses.

Let's use the time and money spent preparing for referendums to work on those problems instead.

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