

Casino greed killed an Alabama lottery

Written by Administrator
Monday, 10 May 2021 08:58 -

This is an opinion column

Tempers flared in the Alabama House of Representatives Thursday night as the wheels came off a package of bills designed to give Alabama both a statewide lottery and nine new casinos.

There exists broad, bipartisan support for a lottery. Regardless of what you or I may think about that in moral or philosophical terms, it's what the polling says. Had sponsors limited their proposal to that alone, it would have passed both in the legislature and in the statewide referendum needed to amend the Alabama constitution.

But no. A few key players saw this as an opportunity to double down and use acceptance of the lottery concept as a pack mule to get something far less palatable across the finish line.

The load seems to have broken the mule's back. The coalition needed to pass the package had to be bipartisan to overcome the resistance of conservative legislators who are anti-gambling and won't ever get on board. But when Democrats decided to flex a little to get some things they need--at this moment where they are indispensable to pro-casino Republicans--the deal began to crumble.

When Republicans realized they were in over their heads and couldn't keep the Democrats satisfied enough to stay in the deal and vote for their casinos, they considered turning their back on Dems altogether. At the last minute, they considered pushing through a lottery-only bill that would bring in a faction of Republicans who, like me, thought the casino proposals in the first bill were a dumpster fire of cronyism and anti-competitive garbage.

But it was late, and in the end, people on all sides were tired and furious and felt deceived. Democrats felt deceived because they had been negotiating to help pass the bill but got hastily dumped at the altar for asking for something in return. Team Casino felt deceived because, in their eyes, the Democrats were flexing too hard, too late in the game, and it was an unfair squeeze.

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The anti-gambling Republicans were furious that a lottery-only bill was being shoved into the hopper last minute, without giving anyone time to read the bill.

So now what?

With only one day left in the legislative session, the chances of anything passing are pretty slim. Odds are the large number of Alabamians who desire a lottery and the revenue it could produce for the state are out of luck for this legislative session.

This process has been like watching Icarus fly too close to the sun.

Had legislators been satisfied to bring the state that which the state was ready for--and only what it was ready for--in a clean, honest package, Alabama would have a lottery as soon as the referendum could have made it onto the ballot. But the desire to go further than our citizens wanted to go and create a system that allowed the government to pick winners and losers poisoned the punch.

I'll never understand how those who campaign under the conservative banner and preach the merits of conservative principles like free markets could have ever put their names on this bill. It is antithetical to everything we say we believe to cook up a deal where businesses don't have to compete--in a fair, open bidding process--for the right to run one of a limited number of casinos in our state.

The now-floundering bill that limited casino licenses to specific sites (the "covered locations" section of the bill) ensured that only a select few--who happen to own those sites--could win. Do you really think if an alternative business put together a better bid package for Macon or Houston County that could produce more revenue for the state, the owners of the facilities in the predetermined "covered locations" would step aside and lease their property to the winners?

If you do, don't ever go to the county fair. You will be a lamb to the slaughter in the hands of the silver-tongued businessmen running the games there.

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In that way, this bill was a big ball of doublespeak from the jump. And I do not understand why Governor Ivey, with whom I usually agree, ever put her support behind it.

Maybe a lottery bill will find its feet in the last legislative day and pass. But if it doesn't, rest assured it was casino greed that killed it and nothing else.

Dana Hall McCain writes about faith, culture, and politics for [AL.com](#). You can follow her on Twitter @dhmccain.

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