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Editorial: Gambling cash should cut debt

THERE are two ways of viewing West Virginia's status as second only to Nevada in the percentage of state government revenue that comes from gamblers.

The first is that this is a good thing because it relieves taxpayers from having to pay full price for the goods and services they receive from state government.

The other point of view is that this shows how dependent state government has become on encouraging people to engage in risky, self-defeating behavior.

There is validity to both points, and therein lies the need for caution in the spending of gambling revenue.

Gamblers pony up 13.4 percent of government revenue in Nevada and nearly 9 percent of the revenues for West Virginia's state government, according to the Rockefeller Institute of Government at the State University of New York in Albany.

The Associated Press said this amounted to \$639 million in West Virginia in the last fiscal year.

Gambling revenues have soared in West Virginia in recent years, as the state allowed four race-

tracks to add slot machines, then legalized slot machines in mini-casinos, and then allowed to racinos to add table games.

But what goes up must come down. Legal or not, online games pose a threat to the state's revenue stream from gambling, as does the probability that neighboring states will liberalize their gambling laws and siphon customers from West Virginia.

West Virginia needs to spend the money it gets from gambling carefully, because it may not always be there. Gambling is an unreliable method for financing the operating expenses of state government.

The money can be put to good use in other ways, particularly by pursuing capital improvements.

The most important infrastructure improvement the state needs is to get its financial house in order. While Gov. Joe Manchin and the Legislature have made great strides in paying down the state's debts, the unfunded liability of the state remains in the billions.

This reduces the state's credit rating, which increases the cost of borrowing money to build roads, schools and sewers.

The state should use much of its gambling money to reduce its debt. It has a window of opportunity in which to do that, and may never get that chance again.