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Editorial: Odds are against using gambling revenue

Maybe Gov. Rod Blagojevich, Senate Democrats and others missed absorbing the recent report by the Rockefeller Institute of Government. The Institute's study found gambling revenue growth has slowed in the last three years around the country. In Illinois, that's definitely the case. The state's portion of gambling revenue is down 14 percent from a year ago, the Chicago Tribune recently reported.

That news shouldn't really be surprising to anyone given our current economic climate. Gambling industry lobbyists like to spin that the drop is due to the smoking ban. That might be part of the cause, too. Whether the revenue drop is because of the smoking ban, the bad economy or both, the news ought to be alarming. It ought to cause those policymakers who are pushing for the state to rely ever more on gambling as the foundation for funding health care, education and other key services to step back and consider the ramifications.

Blagojevich, Senate President Emil Jones and others who want casinos in their towns continue to push for a Chicago casino and several more along with a plan to lease proceeds from the state lottery to help balance the state budget and fund a \$34 billion capital construction plan for rebuilding our roads, bridges, schools. If they do that this year and gambling revenues continue to decline, how will that funding be replaced next year? Is it possible that the gambling revenue decline is part of the reason why we find ourselves today facing a budget with more spending than we can afford? Should we really plan to count on gambling revenue even more or will that simply create bigger budget holes to fill for years to come?

We have a long history of urging caution about expanding gambling and great concern about the social costs it generates as addicts struggle and face financial ruin. Now comes a third-party study that underscores that concern. **The Rockefeller Institute says states should quit relying so much on gambling as a revenue growth stream. Its study found Illinois, at 4 percent, is nearly twice as likely as the average state to rely on gambling for its revenue. It would seem Illinois budgeters already have a gambling addiction of their own.**

Clearly, relying on gambling as a significant state revenue basis is dangerous when the economy spirals as it is now. Blagojevich and other legislators should show the discipline to make tough cuts first and look elsewhere for more revenue rather than an easy gambling fix.

They should set funding priorities and work to make cuts to balance the budget and find funds to rebuild our infrastructure like the rest of us are forced to do with our own finances.

If we need a capital construction plan, and we've said we do see the need for some critical rebuilding, our elected officials ought to find ways to fund it that don't rely on gamblers, gambling addicts and a shrinking revenue stream. If cuts aren't enough, then officials must muster the courage to propose some increases in vehicle and other fees that spread the pain. We all use our roads and bridges; we all ought to help fund the repairs. That's primarily how the state funded its last construction plan called Illinois First.

These are not times to be rolling the dice, playing even more games of chance with the funding for critical state services.