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Guest Editorial: Taking A New Look At Gambling

West Virginia's system — if it can be called that — of regulating legalized gambling is a hodgepodge administered by three separate state agencies. That is merely a symptom of larger problems, however.

State legislators were urged recently to combine regulation of legalized gambling into one agency. State Revenue Secretary Virgil Helton said use of three agencies — the Lottery Commission, Racing Commission and the Tax Division — has resulted in some duplication of services. At the state's four race-tracks, the Lottery Commission oversees table and video gambling, while the Racing Commission is in charge of dog and horse racing, he noted.

We agree with Helton — but believe legislators should undertake a comprehensive study of legalized gambling and, perhaps, a top-to-bottom overhaul of laws regarding it.

Any such review needs to be handled with extreme caution to avoid some of the mistakes of the past, however. A substantial portion of the codebook on legalized gambling was written by — you guessed it — the gambling industry. While the industry

clearly has expertise, West Virginians cannot count upon it to guide the Legislature to enact laws in our best interests.

Gambling has become a critical piece in the state's economy — and government. A study by the Rockefeller Institute of Government revealed that our state is second only to Nevada in the degree to which government revenue depends on legalized gambling. During the 2006 fiscal year, gambling revenue represented nearly 9 percent of West Virginia's general fund budget. Revenue from gambling totaled more than \$650 million during the 2007 fiscal year.

Laws allowing legalized gambling have been enacted in fits and spurts, with the ticket lottery system coming first, followed by approval of video gambling machines, then full-scale casino wagering. The industry itself has prospered in West Virginia.

At some point — soon, we hope — state officials should take a comprehensive, objective new look at legalized gambling. West Virginia has become too reliant on it for the state's regulatory system to continue resembling a game of "52 Pick Up."