EditorialJoe Towalski

While the State Legislature and local governments continue to debate possible funding options for a new Minnesota Vikings stadium, one source of revenue should be off the table: gambling.

Some legislators in St. Paul, however, continue to place their bets on an expansion of gambling to help cover the costs of a new stadium, which carries a price tag around $1 billion. One of the latest proposals, introduced last Monday, is to use funds from a “racino” — a horse track that includes slot machines — to help pay for a stadium. Other ideas put forward include using revenue generated from electronic bingo and pull-tabs, and even a new Twin Cities casino run in partnership with the White Earth tribe.

At first glance, gambling revenue may seem like a good option to help pay for a stadium, which the Vikings say they absolutely must have to stay competitive and remain playing in Minnesota. It reduces the need to raise taxes and relies on the ostensibly voluntary participation of those choosing to play. And, not surprisingly, a large-scale operation stands to generate a lot of money.

Gambling, however, is a poor example of public stewardship. State, county and municipal budgets are ultimately moral documents that reflect the values and priorities of the people for whom they are created. If the thinking is that all Minnesota benefits from building a stadium and keeping the Vikings, then all Minnesotans should shoulder the costs — not just those hoping, despite long odds, to hit a big jackpot.

Cost to society

Large-scale gambling also doesn't come without costs to local communities and the state, which must deal with the social consequences of gambling addictions and the harm gambling can do to low-income households.

While the vast majority of people who gamble don't fall into the category of "problem" or "pathological" gamblers, the small number who do have an impact on the rest of us.

A recent blog post by Minnesota's Joint Religious Legislative Coalition, of which the Minnesota Catholic Conference is a sponsoring body, cited a study that found the social costs of gambling outweigh its social benefits by about three-to-one. Problem gambling, the JRLC noted in a 2005 paper, is associated with criminal behavior, large debts and domestic violence. It cited a study estimating the cost to society for a pathological gambler is $11,304 per year and $3,222 for a

problem gambler.

When problem or pathological gambling — or even one night of excessive gambling — involves low-income individuals, the impact on them and the rest of their household, including spouses and children, can be devastating.

Other approaches

This doesn’t mean we need to outlaw gambling. But it also doesn’t mean the government should be giving approval to practices that undermine the welfare of some of its citizens, including those who pay for the consequences of problem gambling, as it seeks to fund projects and initiatives. It must consider other options.

The new Vikings stadium faces an uphill battle. Politicians and voters must decide how, and even whether, to fund it in a difficult economy when the financial benefits to the general public aren’t clear and when other priorities also demand funding. But for the gambling option as a source of revenue, it’s time for all the players to fold.