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## **Gambling options poor bet for some. Critics say video slots, new casinos compound problems.**

By BEN JACKLET  
*The Portland Tribune*

Jeff Davidson figures he lost more than \$100,000 playing slot machines before he managed to quit.

And he considers himself lucky.

Sure, his credit is shot. But unlike many of Oregon's estimated 60,000 problem and/or pathological gamblers, Davidson quit before losing his car or his home. He didn't burn through his retirement fund or dig himself into debt with one of those double-digit-interest payday loan businesses. He didn't end up in prison for embezzlement, or dead from suicide.

Instead, the 43-year-old writer and consultant sought therapy and quit gambling. He's working to pay off his debts. But like a lot of addiction experts and recovered gambling addicts, he worries that Oregon's plan to expand gambling — with video slots at restaurants and taverns starting in July and two large new tribal casinos planned near Portland — will translate into more hardships for more addicts.

"I was willing to drive two hours to park my butt for a day and a half or more in front of a set of slot machines," Davidson said. "If any bar in town had (offered) slot machines, who knows how far off I would have gone.

"This problem is just going to get worse with the proliferation of these games."

Oregon is just one of five states to offer video poker, and it's been a huge moneymaker.

Since 1985, the Oregon Lottery has contributed more than \$3.4 billion to public education and economic development. Last year was its most profitable ever, with \$895 million in revenues. Now rising pressure on the state budget has led to a recent decision to boost state-run gambling further, by allowing video slots in licensed Oregon restaurants and taverns.

The struggling Cowlitz and Warm Springs tribes also hope to improve their economies by setting up thousands of video slots in major casinos a short drive away from downtown Portland.

The problem, say addiction counselors and recovering addicts, is that video slot machines are just as addictive as video poker, which for some people, is just as addictive as crack cocaine.

And every addiction has its costs.

A 2001 state study estimates that gamblers cost the state \$360 million in social and economic expenses ranging from unpaid debts to lost productivity.

Lottery Director Dale Penn said that more gambling revenues will translate into more services available for problem gamblers because 1 percent of lottery proceeds goes toward research, public education and treatment.

Problem gamblers can receive up to 50 hours per year of free, confidential counseling, he said.

Peter Walsh, program manager for the gambling treatment program at Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare in Southeast Portland, said that addicted gamblers suffer from impulse control disorder, which also affects kleptomaniacs and pyromaniacs.

Research suggests that gambling elevates dopamine and adrenaline levels and activates the same areas of the brain that are stimulated by methamphetamine and cocaine, Walsh said.

Walsh estimates that Cascadia sees about 250 gamblers per month.

“People usually say they don’t have a gambling problem, they have a financial problem,” Walsh said. “That’s what brings it to their attention, whether it’s not being able to pay the rent, or getting their house foreclosed on or their car repossessed.”

Several Cascadia clients agreed to speak to the Portland Tribune to publicize Oregon Problem Gambling Awareness Week, which runs through Friday. But only Davidson was willing to use his name. Others feared humiliation and problems with their jobs or families.

“My wife’s been through enough already,” explained one former gambler, a 54-year-old salesman.

His game of choice was craps, and his addiction was strong enough that he used to drive from Beaverton to Hillsboro by way of Spirit Mountain Casino in Grand Ronde, a detour of more than 100 miles.

The salesman said he got a line of credit of \$60,000 through a local bank to pay some bills and burned through the entire amount in nine months, maxing out a few credit cards along the way.

As a recovered alcoholic, he said, quitting gambling was “way harder than quitting drinking. No comparison.”

Video poker machines are carefully designed to offer incremental payouts and near misses, giving the illusion that the player has

a chance to come out ahead in the long run. The same is true of video slots.

Davidson, who preferred slot machines to video poker, said he hit several jackpots worth \$4,000 and more.

“Every now and then, they feed you a little bit to keep you there,” he said. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t take long for that money to go right back into the machine.”

Penn said the state plans to design its video slot machines with several warnings to gamblers, including a clock that shows how long they have been playing and a display that totals winnings and losses in dollars, not credits.

Walsh and Jeffrey Marotta, problem-gambling services manager for the Oregon Department of Human Services, said gamblers should consider treatment if they do any of the following:

- Try to win back gambling losses through more gambling.
- Exaggerate winnings and downplay losses.
- Hide evidence of gambling from family and friends.
- Continue gambling while bills go unpaid.
- Borrow or steal money to keep gambling — even if they intend to pay it back.

Gamblers interested in a free consultation or treatment can call Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare, 503-239-5952, or the state problem gambling hot line at 1-877-2-STOP-NOW.