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Point blink

Ted Strickland and Bill Harris should agree to disagree, and then find a better way to raise money for the basics of state government

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Ted Strickland and Bill Harris have spent the past few days trying to get the other guy to blink. Now they have until Tuesday to test each other's political mettle. State lawmakers have approved a one-week interim state budget, funding programs at 70 percent of the 2009 level, the basic spending for public schools, higher education and Medicaid receiving exemptions, or protection.

The governor and the Senate president have reached an impasse on the question of deploying thousands of slot machines, or video lottery terminals, at seven horse racetracks. Both have their eyes on the estimated \$933 million the slots would direct into state coffers, allowing them to balance the new state budget. Harris wants the governor to act on his own, as Strickland did in adding keno to the Ohio Lottery. The governor would like legislative approval, arguing that such a step would reassure investors and diminish the possibility of a legal challenge.

The towel-snapping hardly stops there. Harris insists the governor claimed in a meeting that he had "decided to do this," using his executive authority. Strickland counters that the senator has it wrong. He adds that Harris and fellow Republicans supported "video racing terminals" a year ago. What's the difference? the governor asks.

Harris holds that there's big difference, slots involving pure chance, the racing terminals requiring some skill. He reminds that Ohio voters already have rejected casino gambling four times. Ideally, he would like to see a vote of the people. Strickland responds there isn't time. More, state Sen. Bill Seitz, a Cincinnati Republican, contends that eight others in his caucus would side with the governor, if not for remaining loyal to Harris.

Add the 12 Democrats, and you have a majority of the Senate. You get the point. This argument could persist for a long time.

All of it shouldn't obscure the wretchedness of the budget the governor and lawmakers (Democrats and Republicans) have in mind. Recall that lottery money must flow to public schools. So, the thinking is, the slots money will displace a share of the general revenue now routed to education. And if slots fail to meet their revenue projections (like keno), schools will be scrambling further for dollars.

The conference committee has been looking for ways to ease reductions proposed by the governor, affecting libraries, foodbanks, mental health and other programs serving the needy and vulnerable. Yet that likely translates into fewer resources for higher education, a critical priority for the state. In short, Ohio lacks sufficient resources to cover the essentials of state government. Modest tax increases would stave off the worst without harming the state economy. Yet the governor and too many lawmakers are so wary of tax increases they would rather engage in small-minded sparring over slot machines.

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