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## Still stuck in their slots

### Republicans have exposed weaknesses in the governor's position, and he, in turn, has identified shortcomings in their plan

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Ted Strickland talked about a "starting point" when he unveiled his budget "framework" almost three weeks ago. The governor proposed using revenue from electronic slot machines, or video lottery terminals, deployed at seven horse racetracks to help close a \$3.2 billion budget shortfall. On Tuesday, Bill Harris, the Senate president, finally countered with a Republican alternative, arguing that if the governor wants electronic slots, the proposal should be packaged as a constitutional amendment and approved by voters. Harris added that the amendment should include competitive bidding for operations at seven unspecified locations.

In other words, no guarantee for the racetracks.

Harris was correct in signaling what many at the Statehouse recognize: The racing industry has been driving the governor's slots plan — thus, the value of competitive bidding. More, winning voter approval would all but ensure the deal would stick, erasing past voter opposition to casino gambling, not to mention supplanting narrow readings of what is allowed in expanding the Ohio Lottery.

Senate Republicans identified real weaknesses in the governor's approach, and then Strickland returned the favor. The governor rightly held that the state would be better served with a two-year budget approved now rather than waiting until November to find out whether funds would be available for schools and other public programs and services.

The trouble is, as Harris and his allies note, the governor is gambling, too. He can expect a lawsuit challenging his claim that the slot machines amount to a mere extension of the state lottery.

In that way, the performances of the past week have amounted to partisan maneuvering, and little more, adversaries looking for an advantage in the coming election year. The jousting exposed further the severe shortcomings of electronic slot machines as an answer to the immediate public policy problem of putting the state's fiscal house in order.

The expectation is that the slot machines would produce \$933 million during the biennium. Recall that revenues from the recently instituted keno are running far short of projections.

There are much better ways to balance the state's books, ways that indicate some grasp of the true size of the state's deficit. This budget benefits from almost \$7 billion in one-time money, including \$5 billion in federal stimulus funds. Once that money disappears in two years, the state will face a gargantuan shortfall. The governor and others stress that they must address first the next two years. Yet the size of the looming deficit, and its dark consequences, argue for action sooner rather than later.

The moment calls for putting aside the wrangling over electronic slots and developing a stable funding stream that ensures the state has the necessary resources to meet its responsibilities and obligations.

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