

Could gambling machines be coming to a Wal-Mart near you?

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ARKANSAS -- Arkansas Lottery Director Ernie Passailaigue gave a preview this week of the newest attraction that could be coming to Wal-Mart stores across the state — lottery ticket vending machines.

Maybe not Wal-Mart specifically, admitted Passailaigue, but if he gets his way either Wal-Mart or big box stores like them will have automated machines dispensing lottery tickets. Passailaigue says that this is “the wave of the future.”

With a swipe of the patron’s driver’s license, their age is validated and the lottery tickets can be purchased without clogging up the lines at your local retailer. It does require an employee, who I assume would be within sight of the machine, to operate a “kill switch” that can shut it off if someone underage is trying some funny business.

Needless to say this idea has already been met with some opposition spearheaded by Jerry Cox with Family Council of Arkansas.

“The truth is, children are going to illegally purchase lottery tickets if Arkansas welcomes vending machines,” Cox said in a press release earlier this month. “The Arkansas Lottery Commission continues to talk about safeguards, like having to swipe a driver’s license, but this will not be enough to effectively prevent children from buying tickets. All they would have to do is borrow a driver’s license from an 18-year-old friend or take one out of their parent’s wallet.”

Passailaigue writes off these concerns as coming from groups that have always been opposed to the lottery. He says the machines are as safe as any other system and necessary to reach new venues where the traditional methods of selling tickets do not work.

It does not take Passailaigue long to get very defensive on the subject. He says that in reality the groups that oppose the machines are opposing college scholarships. On a Little

Rock radio station this week, he even went so far as to dismiss Cox as “a high-priced lobbyist,” which is laughable to anyone who knows Cox.

The lottery commission has 100 machines ready to roll out as soon as the Arkansas Lottery Commission Legislative Oversight Committee approves the proposed rules when they meet in August. These machines will bring in an estimated \$5 million in additional revenue. If they are not allowed, it will mean a thousand Arkansans can't go to college next year, Passailaigue insists.

This is a familiar defense for Passailaigue. When he suffered criticism during the lottery startup, he argued that he must proceed with his plan in order to get the lottery up and running as soon as possible. Every day delayed would cost a million dollars in lost revenue meaning kids can't go to college.

But the questions that are being raised are legitimate. Sure, Arkansans approved the lottery in 2008 with the notable salesmanship of Lt. Gov. Bill Halter, but we still get to decide how we want the lottery to look. And dismissing Arkansans' concerns is not the best way for Passailaigue to win over the state.

There can be little doubt that the lottery is a tax of some sort. It is more palatable to lawmakers because it is voluntary, meaning you don't have to buy a lottery ticket. However, how aggressive the state becomes in separating Arkansans from their money is the current debate.

Those with opinions should let their local state representative or state senator know before the Legislative Oversight Committee meets in August. Otherwise, get ready for a whole new blue light special coming to your hometown store.

