

Fewer gambling, bets bigger

By David Jackson

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HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA – Gamblers pumped less cash into video lottery terminals but bet bigger at the Halifax and Sydney casinos, as the number of visitors dropped last year, newly released gambling numbers show.

Players poured \$820 million into VLTs in the 2005-06 fiscal year, down from \$895 million the previous year, according to the provincial alcohol and gaming division's annual report.

The machines took 54.5 per cent of the \$1.5 billion wagered on VLTs and lotteries, and at casinos, and bingos last year.

The province's VLT profit after prize payouts and expenses was \$117.4 million, down from \$132.6 million.

Margaret McGee, spokeswoman for the Nova Scotia Gaming Corp., said the drop reflects the steps the gaming corporation took to reduce the attraction and accessibility of VLTs.

"It's ironic because in the private sector, a drop in income would be a bad-news story, but in this case, it's actually us doing what we said we were going to do on behalf of the province, which was responding to issues raised about this product line," Ms. McGee said Friday.

The province's gaming strategy released in April 2005 called for a series of changes to VLTs during the fiscal year.

Starting that July, the machines shut down daily at midnight, regardless of how late the establishment was open. In November, the province removed 800 machines, almost one-quarter of the off-reserve machines in the province.

Between January and March, the stop feature -- which gave players the impression they could control the game's outcome -- was removed, and the speed of the machines was decreased 30 per cent.

Bernie Walsh, an anti-VLT lobbyist for nine years after battling his own gambling addiction, doesn't believe the VLT changes are having an impact on those who need them most -- problem gamblers.

"The gamblers themselves say none of these have had any effect on their play," he said.

"To me, the only solution is to get rid of the machines."

A survey of VLT players commissioned by the gaming corporation found that the changes have led some problem gamblers to spend less time and money at the machines.

New Democrat MLA Howard Epstein said the drop in VLT revenue doesn't tell the whole story. He said slight increases in casino and lottery wagers show people are shifting their gambling dollars around.

"We don't know whether people are moving to just another easy form of gambling, namely the Internet, and that's the problem," he said.

"And there's no indication that our numbers of problem gamblers are down at all, so I think we still have a big problem in Nova Scotia."

Liberal gaming critic Leo Glavine said the drop in VLT wagers may mean that some people have simply run out of money to bet with.

The Halifax and Sydney casinos both had big drops in the number of visitors.