



Top Story

Lottery paying dividends in county

By Zack Plair

zplair@paragoulldaily.com

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To the delight of more than 60 percent of voters, and to the chagrin of a trumped minority who feared the worst, Arkansas in Sept. 2009 became the 43rd state to operate a lottery.

In the 2 1/2 years since its inception, despite starkly dissonant viewpoints from a number of factions on the issue, the lottery has seemingly been assimilated into state culture with relative ease, as ticket stands have become commonplace in convenience stores, supermarkets and other retailers. Additionally, some state officials claim that the lottery has outperformed expectations.

Voters approved the lottery in 2008 to fund college scholarships for in-state students. Since the first lottery ticket sold at midnight Sept. 28, 2009, ticket sales have exceeded \$1.57 billion, with the lottery generating \$1.26 million in average ticket sales per-day, according to Arkansas Scholarship Lottery director of public affairs and legislative relations Julie Baldrige.

In Greene County alone, 22 retailers in Paragould, Marmaduke and Delaplaine have netted \$903,300 from ticket sales, while county residents have claimed more than \$9.5 million in total prize money. Also, Baldrige said almost 1,000 county students had received more than \$6 million from lottery scholarships.

Baldrige told Paragould Rotary Club recently she actually voted against the lottery, but she thought it had produced positive results for scholarship recipients and ticket vendors. With that, however, she added she recognized the lottery's "distinct downside," particularly people who spent more than their expendable income with unreasonable hopes that their ticket would hit it big.

"It's a lottery. It's gambling," she said. "If you play because you think you're going to win, we don't want your money. But this is America. People can ruin their lives if they want to."

She, however, stopped short of calling the lottery a "tax on poor people." In fact she said state polling showed the average household annual income for ticket buyers at \$37,500. She said before Arkansas' lottery began, Arkansans spent about \$100 million annually playing lotteries in other states.

She added Arkansas lottery winners tended to be fairly practical with their prize money.

"When [people] win the lottery and we ask them what they'll do with the money, they pretty much say 'pay off the truck or house, and then I'm going to put the rest in the bank,'" Baldrige said.

State Senator Robert Thompson of Paragould, who also voted against the lottery, now sits on the



Dodge's Chicken Store in Paragould dons on its counter what has become a familiar site in the variety of tickets for sale through the Arkansas Scholarship Lottery. The lottery has generated more than \$900,000 in profit for 22 Greene County retailers and provided more than \$6 million in scholarships to almost 1,000 county students in just 2 1/2 years.

joint legislative committee that oversees the growing operation. He said he still had philosophical concerns about the lottery's social impact, but he thought the state's lottery was run about as responsibly as one could be.

"It's hard to say whether the good outweighs the bad, but most people want a lottery, so I want it to be as successful as possible," he said. "The [unfortunate] effect of the lottery is that poor people disproportionately pay for scholarships for middle- and upperclass kids. We just have to focus on making it as effective and fair as possible."

To preserve that fairness, Thompson said the lottery sought to protect vulnerable people with such safeguards as not allowing people to play lottery on credit or online. He said it also put safeguards in place to keep minors from playing.

Thompson said the scholarships seemed to encourage more students to attend college because more students had applied for scholarships than initially expected. Of those, he said 75 percent opted to attend four-year universities, while the remainder attended two-year and vocational schools. He said a lottery scholarship could pay a student who attended a four-year institution a total of up to \$20,000.

"If we're going to have a lottery, so far the one we have has been successful in providing scholarships to qualified students that are pretty close to tuition at [most] public institutions," he said. "What I really hope, with respect to students receiving lottery scholarships, is that they recognize what a good deal they've got, and they'll study hard and keep their grades up to remain eligible [to maintain their scholarships]."

Still, some local residents, even representatives with lottery retailers, remain torn between the lottery's economic and educational upside and what they said they've personally seen as a negative impact on those who could least afford it.

Wendie Parnell, Dodge's Chicken store leader in Paragould, said the convenience store had sold lottery tickets since the first day they were available. She said the tickets had generated excitement and repeat business for the store, but she struggled with what she called the "ethical conflict" of the lottery.

"Anytime you introduce something that gets people in the door, from a business standpoint, it's worth it," Parnell said. "It just anguishes me to see people use their hard-earned money on it, and generally it's people who can't afford it who spend it. We have people that will play in here all night and we have to go back-and-forth between them and our other customers."

"It's good for business, but as a Christian woman, it grieves me," she added. "If I was a business owner, I would have a hard time selling lottery tickets."

Baldrige said she felt keeping the lottery "vanilla" and not expanding to other forms of gambling, such as casinos, would also help safeguard "vulnerable" people. She added the lottery commission by law dedicated \$200,000 per-year to the Arkansas Department of Human Services to fund compulsive and problem gambling treatment. She said it also offered a hotline to help problem gamblers.