

Dee J. Hall: Bill would block scrutiny of lottery winners

Posted on Wednesday, Jun 5, 2019

The column below reflects the views of the author, and these opinions are neither endorsed nor supported by WisOpinion.com.

When University of Wisconsin-Madison student journalist Peter Coutu investigated frequent lottery winners in Wisconsin in 2018, he uncovered a pattern: the owners and clerks of stores that sell lottery tickets seemed to have more luck than normal.

In his [article](#) for Wisconsin Watch, Coutu consulted a statistical expert, who concluded that the lucky streaks among some of the frequent winners of the Wisconsin Lottery defied any reasonable explanation.

In all, Coutu found that three of the top 13 frequent winners had close ties to the retailers selling them the winning tickets. Another expert noted in the article that retailers get a cut of the winnings, providing additional temptation to cheat.

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

When Coutu joined the Virginian-Pilot newspaper in Norfolk, Virginia, later in 2018, he conducted a [similar investigation](#). He found that many of the frequent winners in that state also were lottery retailers. One, the owner of a Newport News store, had cashed in 140 lottery tickets worth more than \$400,000, including 23 tickets purchased at his own store.

The findings prompted policy changes in the Virginia Lottery, including scrutiny of frequent lottery winners — which Wisconsin already does — and a requirement that winners disclose any ties to lottery retailers. It also sparked criminal investigations into some potentially fraudulent winnings.

But such independent examination of suspicious lottery activity would no longer be

possible in Wisconsin under the recently introduced Lottery Privacy Act. [AB 213](#), sponsored by Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, and Rep. Gary Tauchen, R-Bonduel, would allow winners to shield their names from the public.

In announcing the bill, Tauchen said he was responding to concerns that jackpot winners could be targeted for fraud, abuse and harassment. “Just because you win the lottery,” Vos said, “it shouldn’t mean you lose your right to privacy.”

Virginia recently passed a bill to shield the names of some lottery winners — but only those who claimed a ticket [worth \\$10 million or more](#). In 2017, Texas [allowed](#) lottery winners of \$1 million or more to conceal their identity. Delaware, Ohio and South Carolina all let anyone who wins remain anonymous. But in New Jersey, Gov. Chris Christie [vetoed](#) a similar measure, saying it would “undermine the transparency that provides taxpayers confidence in the integrity of the Lottery.”

To be sure, privacy issues are important — but so is public integrity. And the Wisconsin Lottery is big business.

Since it launched in 1988, the lottery has [generated](#) \$4.3 billion in property tax relief. Players have won \$8.2 billion in prizes. And retailers have gotten \$920 million in bonuses for selling winning tickets.

Customers buy tickets with the assumption that their odds of winning are the same as anyone else’s. Politicians should not be chipping away at that trust.

Lottery spokeswoman Patty Mayers told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel in April that the agency favors the current policy, which “protects the integrity of the lottery” and is “rooted in a tradition of transparency.”

That is the right approach. Shielding the names of winners would make it hard for the public and the media to figure out whether the lottery is on the up-and-up — or whether we are being bamboozled.

-Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council (wisfoic.org), a group dedicated to open government. Dee J. Hall is the council’s secretary and managing editor of Wisconsin Watch.