

ROLLING THE DICE:

ALBERTA'S EXPERIENCE WITH DIRECT DEMOCRACY AND VIDEO LOTTERY TERMINALS



Introduction

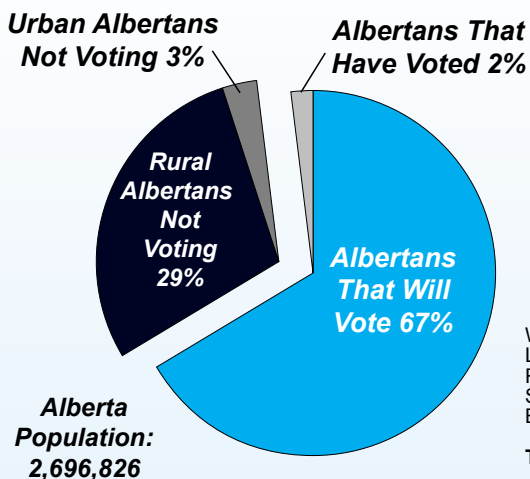
On October 19, 1998, Albertans will go to the polls in municipal elections. At the same time, more than two-thirds of the voters (including residents of the province's seven largest cities), will participate in a historic democratic event; 1.8 million Albertans will be eligible to exercise their legislative right to vote on the removal of Video Lottery Terminals (VLTs) from their communities.

Two things make this opportunity unique and historic: (1) the votes in Calgary and Edmonton (and other municipalities) will take place despite the fact that the local governments did not feel the issue warranted a vote; and (2) the results of the municipal plebiscites will affect an area of provincial jurisdiction—gambling.

The use of democratic instruments other than elections to express public sentiment has a long tradition in Alberta. Indeed, western Canada pioneered Canada's trail of direct democracy. As far back as 1912, when Saskatchewan introduced the first legislation allowing for occasional citizen plebiscites, western Canadians have sought the opportunity to directly participate in

FIGURE 1

Alberta Regions Voting on VLTs



Have Voted:

Wood Buffalo	35,213
Lacombe	8,018
Rocky Mtn. House	5,805
Sylvan Lake	5,178
Barrhead	4,160
Total	58,374

Will Vote: 1,796,836

Calgary	768,082	Spruce Grove	14,271	Ponoka	6,149
Edmonton	616,306	Camrose	14,121	Coaldale	6,000
Strathcona County	64,176	Ft. Saskatchewan	12,408	Drayton Valley	5,985
Lethbridge	63,053	Hinton	9,961	Beaumont	5,810
Red Deer	60,075	Canmore	8,354	Jasper	4,700
St. Albert	46,888	Lacombe	8,018	Devon	4,380
Medicine Hat	46,783	Stony Plain	7,806	Black Diamond	1,811
Leduc	14,300	Edson	7,399		

Source: Personal Communication with Municipal Clerks and 1996 Census.

Note: For consistency, totals are based on 1996 Census data. The results of the first Lacombe vote have been invalidated, a second vote has been scheduled for October 19, 1998. Coalhurst and Picture Butte announced Sept 23/98 they will hold votes.

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local decision-making. Alberta entered the fray one year later with its 1913 *Direct Legislation Act* that provided a vehicle by which citizens could vote on proposed legislation and initiate legislation. British Columbia's recent introduction of recall and initiative legislation carries on this groundbreaking tradition. Western Canadians more than Canadians anywhere else have sought out the structures of a more participatory society. It is this deep-rooted tradition of democracy that was the springboard for successful municipal petition campaigns in Alberta.

The combination of an explosive issue and the high number of signatures required by legislation resulted in the two largest municipal petitions ever completed in Canada. The Calgary and Edmonton petition drives are not only impressive as local initiatives but rank among Canada's top 15 petitions of any kind (Figure 2).

This report examines the key issues and events of the VLT debate and, more importantly, the groundbreaking grassroots campaign that took place in Calgary. Specifically, the report will address: (1) the history of the VLT debate in Alberta; (2) petitions and votes in Alberta; (3) Calgary's petition campaign; and (4) who and what influenced the outcome.

The History of the VLT Debate in Alberta

To determine the events surrounding the introduction of VLTs and their evolution into a political topic, members of all interested parties were interviewed including the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, problem gambling support groups, political parties, the Alberta Government, Hospitality Alberta, Calgarians for Democratic Choice, Vote On Terminals Edmonton, members of the 1995 Lottery Review Committee, Calgary City Council members, academics, members of the media, concerned citizens, and professional psychologists. In addition, we reviewed the submissions to the Lotteries Review Committee established in 1994, gathered an extensive collection of media articles from 1992 to the present, searched the Hansard for relevant debates in the Alberta Legislature and consulted a number of reports commissioned by the Alberta government on gambling and problem gambling.

VLTs were first tested in 1991 and introduced

FIGURE 2

Canada's Largest Petitions

Issue	Year	Rank	Number
Federal			
Against TV Violence	1992	# 1	1,300,000
Against Assault Weapons	1991	# 4	556,710
Criminal Code Sentencing	1994	# 5	440,163
Gun Control (Repeal)	1994	# 7	284,767
Young Offenders	1994	# 8	232,356
Sex Orientation (Don't Protect)	1994	#11	148,273
Quality Child Care	1997	#14	120,000
Provincial			
Condemning Canada for Repatriation of the Constitution (Quebec)	1982	# 2	760,000
Request for a Sovereignty Referendum (Quebec)	1992	# 3	+700,000
Homolka Plea Bargain (ON)	1995	# 6	320,000
Against Bill 84 (ON)	1997	# 9	200,000
Against Bill 19 (BC)	1987	#10	150,000
Montford Hospital (ON)	1997	#12	132,000
Medicare Principles (AB)	1996	#16	+80,000
Municipal			
VLT Plebiscite (Calgary)	1998	#13	123,870
VLT Plebiscite (Edmonton)	1998	#15	105,437
Against Fluoridation (Calgary)	1991	n/a	48,784
Airport Petition (Edmonton)	1992	n/a	41,802

Source: Canada West Foundation, 1998.

Note: 2.5 million Canadians have reportedly signed the de Villiers petition regarding criminals out on bail. It has not been formally presented to the House of Commons as of August 1998.

province-wide in 1992. According to Ken Kowalski, Minister Responsible for Lotteries at the time, the three primary motivations to introduce VLTs were:

- a growing concern over the potential increase in the number of illegal machines, particularly in other provinces;
- customer demand—VLTs were becoming popular everywhere—Albertans asked for them and they were going elsewhere to play them; and
- like any industry, new products must be introduced to keep it successful.

Initial Considerations

During the testing phase of the introduction of VLTs, a number of factors were considered. These included where VLTs should be placed, who should control them, and how the revenues of VLTs may affect other forms of gambling. It was determined that VLTs should be placed in age-restricted locations. As a result, they were placed in bars and hotel lounges and tied to liquor licenses. Although a

likely location, VLTs were not placed in race tracks because the racetracks lacked age restrictions at the time and it was a concern that VLTs might compete with track gambling. The requirement of an age-restricted location ruled out sites such as convenience stores and supermarkets, sites that were common locations of VLTs in some maritime provinces at the time.

Although private corporations such as amusement operators lobbied to run the VLT industry in Alberta, the government decided they could best regulate VLTs through the existing provincially appointed ticket lottery organization, Alberta Lotteries. This ensured the government could retain control of the gambling industry and the revenues that it produced.

Many community groups rely on the revenue from forms of gambling such as bingos, raffles and casinos. The government considered how VLTs would affect the revenues of these groups. The thinking was that VLTs would bring in additional revenues which could be distributed to the community groups. It was argued that this would make up for any revenue reductions from other gambling sources caused by VLTs.

Prior to the wide-spread introduction of VLTs, the government consulted with groups such as the RCMP, other provincial governments, and the hotel industry. The RCMP was consulted about the rise in the number of illegal VLTs throughout Canada and on the best methods to control illegal gambling. Other provincial impact studies on VLTs were considered. Mr. Kowalski felt that the findings of these studies could be applied to Alberta, so no new studies were commissioned until 1994. The hotel industry was consulted about having VLTs placed in lounges. The hotel industry had been seeking financial assistance and tax breaks from the government, and the VLT program provided a good compromise.

Voices of Concern

When VLTs were introduced, the media coverage was subdued. However, the articles that were written were not overwhelmingly positive. Notably, in 1992, Barry Nelson, a columnist with the *Calgary Herald*, announced the introduction of VLTs with a scathing prediction that the provincial government would become addicted to VLT revenues, at a great cost to society. "The slots will be a bonanza for the government. They will also cause significant changes in the social climate" (*Calgary Herald*, June 4, 1992).

In 1994, the Provincial Liberals began to express concerns about the addictive nature of VLTs and their impact on individuals and families. Prior to this time, debate in the Legislature focused on ensuring the private sector benefited from VLTs, accountability with respect to VLT revenues, and the potential impact VLTs would have on the revenues of community groups. Human interest stories of all kinds regarding VLTs became popular in the media in 1994/95. It was also at this time that the media began to report the Liberal's stance against VLTs.

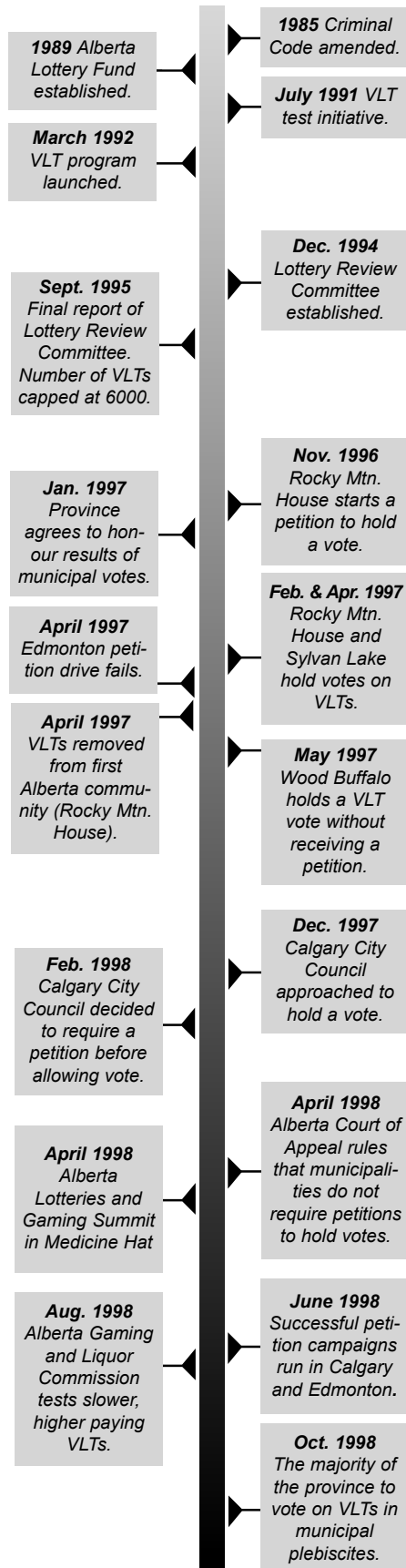
Public opinion on VLTs from 1992 to 1994 became increasingly negative. Angus Reid, commissioned by the provincial government, produced a number of studies to this effect. These reports revealed that:

- VLTs represented increased access to "hard gambling" and that many people knew a problem gambler that could be potentially hurt by such access;
- VLTs were becoming associated with problem gambling on par with casinos; 48% of those on a panel associated VLTs with problem gambling. Until VLTs gained their notoriety, casinos were considered the most severe form of gambling;
- there was a correlation between negative feelings about gambling and the number of VLTs in the province; and
- there was a great deal of suspicion regarding how provincial gambling revenue was being used. The studies warned that this distrust would only grow as proceeds from VLTs increased.

Why the Focus on VLTs?

In 1994, Premier Klein established the Lotteries Review Committee to consult with Albertans about the future of lotteries. Bob King, then Chair of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, stated that it was the hearings of the Committee which alerted the government to the concern over VLTs. However, the questions the Committee prepared for contributors indicate the government was already aware that VLTs were an issue separate from other forms of gambling. For example, the fourth issue prepared for the hearings was "What is the impact of VLTs on community organizations?" A 1994 Angus Reid public opinion study would have already alerted them to the pub-

VLT Timeline



lic's concern over access to VLTs. The report stated that: "six in ten think that VLTs are more addictive than regular lotteries, and half think that there should be more controls placed on where people can play video lotteries."

Indeed, the public submissions to the Lottery Review Committee painted VLTs in a very negative light. However, even the Angus Reid public opinion research indicating a general distrust toward VLTs does not explain why the issue became so explosive. During interviews, some members of the Lottery Review Committee suggested the consultation process was influenced by the Alberta Liberals, focusing the submissions on VLTs. Upon analysis, this seems unlikely. Although the Liberals were against the VLT program from the beginning, they did not make an argument that grabbed the public's attention. Nor were self-help groups for problem gamblers responsible for the focus. They were wary of VLTs because they were another form of gambling but they did little to distinguish them. Others, such as church groups were morally opposed to VLTs but, like the problem gambling groups, were against gambling in a broad sense rather than VLTs in particular. There is no evidence that these groups account for the swift emergence of the VLT issue in 1995.

Rather, it is evident that the anti-VLT sentiment growing in the province found a new and unexpected voice. This voice took the form of groups that might not have been considered a natural enemy of VLTs—the community groups who were dependent on the lottery grants and revenue from other forms of gambling such as bingos and raffles. These groups perceived that declining revenues from traditional forms of gambling were a direct result of the increased use of VLTs. It is important to note that this is in fact only a perception. Actual revenue from bingos, casinos and raffles between 1992 and 1994 did *not* decrease. Gross revenue from these charitable gambling activities actually *increased* \$67 million over this period. In addition, VLTs were not the only form of gambling to have experienced an increase in revenues. Revenues from "superraffles" such as the Alberta Home Lottery were also cutting into the charitable revenue streams from charitable casinos and bingos.

While there was emerging negative public sentiment toward VLTs, by the time community groups were invited by the Lottery Review Committee to comment on VLTs, the issue had been singled out. Unlike the Liberals, whose attack on VLTs was political, and problem gambling groups who were against gambling as a whole, the community groups pointed a finger of concern directly at the VLTs. As *supporters* of most forms of gambling, but *opponents* of VLTs, community groups were able to use their large and broad membership to grab the public's and government's attention. This allowed for a growing public awareness and ultimately the emergence of public opinion leaders to sound out the anti-vlt cause over the next three years.

Government Action

Feedback regarding VLTs appears to have had an impact on the Lottery Review Committee because the final report made a number of recom-

mendations to address the VLT situation. Included in these were recommendations to:

- let individual municipalities decide by petition if they wish to prohibit VLTs;
- limit the number of VLTs to 6,000;
- limit the number of VLTs in each facility;
- eliminate multiple licenses;
- limit the number of VLTs in bars and lounges and move the surplus to casinos;
- slow down the speed of VLTs; and
- establish Lottery Boards to distribute lottery revenues.

With the exception of moving some of the machines to casinos, each of the above were implemented or are in the process of being implemented.

Given the widespread movement across the province to have a vote to eliminate VLTs altogether, some feel the recommendations did not go far enough. Others, such as some members of the Hotel Industry, feel the provincial government simply did not act quickly enough on the recommendations that were made. The one thing that does seem to have widespread agreement is that the provincial government has been slow to respond to the issue.

Although the Video Lottery Terminals issue was an emerging concern in Alberta within a few years after their introduction, the negative feeling toward VLTs in 1994 certainly does not match the fervor with which VLTs are attacked today. Factors that have played a role in the growth of the issue are:

- the media's and the public's suspicion about government revenues from gambling and, in particular, the surprisingly large revenues from VLTs;
- the increased accessibility to gambling in bars and lounges exposes gambling to new demographic groups;
- the perceived/real negative impact that VLTs had on the revenues of community groups from existing forms of gambling; and

- the human interest aspect of any gambling issue that appealed to the media and public leaders.

As a result of these factors, citizens in some Alberta communities began to explore what could be done about VLTs. Alberta's history and democratic traditions provided the answer. Citizens had the right to petition their local council to hold a vote on the removal of the VLTs.

Petitions and Votes in Alberta

Alberta citizens have taken one of two routes to earn the right to vote on the VLT issue. The first method was to ask their local councils for an opportunity to have a vote, as it is a council's right to garner the opinions of its citizens. Some councils agreed to exercise this right and scheduled a vote (e.g., Lethbridge, Red Deer and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo).

Other municipal governments have deferred any decision-making responsibility on this matter by requiring those seeking a vote to first obtain a valid petition. In this case, if citizens wish to compel their council to hold a vote, they have to do so under the provisions of Alberta's *Municipal Government Act* (MGA). This was the option required in both Calgary and Edmonton.

Citizens in Alberta and Saskatchewan can force a municipality to act on an issue because they have been given that opportunity under provincial legislation. Section 219 of Alberta's MGA allows citizens to require a municipality to act on a matter within its jurisdiction if a sufficient petition is brought forward. However, the rules for sufficiency are quite restrictive. In fact, the petition rules are so difficult that since the MGA was changed in 1994, the VLT petitions are the first valid petitions on any kind that have been brought forward in a major Alberta centre.

Specifically, Alberta's MGA requires that:

- the petition be signed by enough electors (aged 18+) to equal at least 10% of the total population of the municipality (including children);
- all signatures must be gathered within a 60 day period;

- each signature must be witnessed;
- each witness must swear to a Commissioner for Oaths as to the authenticity of each signature;
- non-Canadian citizens and non-residents are unable to sign; and
- each signature will be authenticated by the municipality to determine the validity of the petition.

These rules are among the strictest conditions of any petition legislation in Canada. The arduous nature of these requirements has ensured that the petitions brought forward in Calgary and Edmonton are truly unique in Canada. Prior to authentication the total number of signatures brought forward was 124,000 in Calgary and 105,000 in Edmonton. To put these number in perspective, more people signed the Calgary petition than voted in the 1993 municipal election (120,000). Nearly one in three adult Edmontonians signed the petition and nearly one in four adult Calgarians signed.

Of note is the public misconception that Albertans, through petitions, have the right to remove VLTs from a region. In reality, the authority to remove any machine lies exclusively with the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC). The municipal votes are only an expression of the will of the people. Further, although the people are expressing that desire to their municipal government, municipalities have no control over gambling policy. It is strictly a provincial matter.

Before a VLT is removed from a municipality, four steps must occur:

1. a municipal council must agree to hold a vote (with or without a valid petition);
2. the results of that vote must indicate the will of the community (50% plus one);
3. the council must decide to forward those results to the AGLC; and
4. The AGLC must decide to act on its right to terminate their agreement with the retailer.

Only after these steps have occurred will the govern-

ment act to remove the machines. However, there is no legislative requirement to remove the VLTs. In a December 1995 news release, the province stated a *willingness* to go along with the results of any community plebiscites and remove VLTs from those communities that vote them out. Apart from this reference there is no formal policy in place to deal with VLT votes.

The December 1995 reference derived from the recommendation of the Lottery Review Committee. The Committee found that some municipalities wanted to be able to determine their own destiny regarding the gambling options available locally. It was the recommendation of the Committee that communities should be able to decide by plebiscite to prohibit VLTs in their community. In addition, the recommendation also mentioned that if a community voted to remove VLTs they would lose their share of VLT revenue, but not other gambling revenue.

Following the publication of these recommendations, two Alberta communities would play a significant role in laying the foundation for the current petition initiatives: Rocky Mountain House and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

Rocky Mountain House

By November 1996, there had been no additional statements or clarification regarding the procedure for VLT votes other than the December 1995 reference.. Nonetheless, the citizens of Rocky Mountain House began to assemble the first petition to hold a vote on VLTs in Alberta. Although organizers admit that they were not concerned with the broad implications of their efforts, this first VLT petition effort would have a profound effect on the government's VLT program. The effort of these petition gatherers forced the VLT issue into the public and the Premier was required to clarify the government's commitment to the outcome of VLT petitions.

In direct response to the mounting pressure created by the Rocky Mountain House petition, the Premier publically agreed in January 1997 that the AGLC would honour the outcome of the Rocky Mountain House plebiscites. The Premier instructed the AGLC to remove the VLTs from any community in which a majority of citizens voted them out. At the same time, the province also determined that it could not remove VLT funding from those communities that voted out the machines for two reasons: (1) provincial accounting practices could not separate VLT lottery revenue

from other lottery revenue within the lottery fund; and (2) some communities without VLT machines still receive lottery funding. Lottery funding was deemed to be unrelated to whether a community possesses or removes VLT machines.

Following the Premier's commitment, the citizens voted 1,035 to 565 in favour of removing the machines. Once a retailer's lawsuit was dropped, the AGLC fulfilled its commitment and Rocky Mountain House became the first community in Canada to vote on and remove Video Lottery Terminals.

Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo

Unlike the petition effort in Rocky Mountain House, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo was the first community to hold a vote without first having received a petition. The Wood Buffalo Council initiated a vote for its citizens without first receiving a petition. This action caused a set of legal challenges that would influence the actions of other city councils.

In making his initial promise to honour the outcome of the votes, Premier Klein did not specifically indicate that councils would require a petition before they could vote. In March 1997, the Minister Responsible for Lotteries issued a statement indicating that the province would honour the results of "any community plebiscite." As a result, the Wood Buffalo Council saw an opportunity to hold an inexpensive plebiscite in conjunction with an election that took place in May 1997. By doing so, it was argued—by VLT retailers—that the local council artificially created an issue in the region that did not exist. The vote took place (5,223 to 3,177 in favour of removing VLTs), but the region did not immediately submit the results pending a decision on a legal challenge to their jurisdiction and right to hold such a vote.

The implications of the Wood Buffalo case were substantial. Following the April 1998 decision of the Alberta Court of Appeal, it was determined that (1) municipalities could indeed poll their citizens on issues, even if they have no jurisdiction over the specific issue; and (2) municipalities can communicate to higher levels of government the wishes of their citizens. Armed with this legal assurance, some communities proceeded to schedule votes without petitions (e.g., Lethbridge, Canmore).

In fact, there are currently two incentives for municipal councils to consider holding a vote *without* a petition. First, because of the requirements of the MGA,

councils must count and validate each petition and, if it is deemed valid, they must comply with the requirements of the petition and schedule a vote on the matter. This can be an expensive process. Calgary's Council was forced to budget an additional \$150,000 for validation and election expenses surrounding the VLT petition. Communities are realizing that they can avoid these costs by conceding that petitions are likely to succeed and proceeding directly to a vote. Certainly the successful petitions in Calgary and Edmonton have left other councils with a sense that the issue warrants a place on the ballot.

Second, because October 19 is also the date of municipal elections in the province, many municipalities see an opportunity to avoid the cost of holding a stand-alone plebiscite by piggybacking the vote with the municipal elections. If a municipality receives a petition outside of the current window of opportunity, they will be required to hold a stand-alone plebiscite, entirely at their expense. Because of this, many councils chose to hold a vote on October 19, 1998 without requiring a petition. Municipalities that do not deal with the issue in October may incur a higher cost if their citizens present a valid petition at a later date.

Calgary's VLT Petition

In an effort to follow this grassroots democratic movement from its birth to its ultimate conclusion, the Canada West Foundation monitored all events of the Calgary petition process. The following analysis will examine the significant milestones and motivating factors that led up to the completion of the largest ever municipal petition in Canada. The four phases of the campaign that will be examined are: (1) organizational development; (2) strategy and planning; (3) signature gathering; and (4) post-petition events.

Organizational Development

Although there is evidence of Calgarians' concerns about VLTs prior to the fall of 1997, it was not until a prominent community leader became involved that the issue appeared to crystallize in the city. Arguably, it was Jim Gray, a successful Calgary oilman, long-time Conservative Party supporter, social activist, and board member of numerous non-profit organizations (including the YMCA, Science Alberta Foundation, Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter Association and Canada West Foundation) who lent a measure of credibility to these pre-existing concerns about the impact of VLTs and gambling on communities.

Mr. Gray's personal interests were no different than many other individuals who had expressed concerns. He was familiar with some data on the benefits and harm of gambling and lottery revenue and he knew of an individual that had experienced hardship because of VLTs. Armed with this motivation, he began to voice these concerns to whomever would listen. One of the first groups approached were the delegates at the provincial Progressive Conservative Convention and Premier Klein in September 1997. Although he succeeded in raising a few eyebrows among participants, Calgarians would prove more receptive to his ideas.

In December 1997, Mr. Gray approached the intergovernmental affairs committee of the Calgary City Council to ask them to put the VLT issue to a plebiscite. Based on Mr. Gray's remarks, this committee recommended to Council that Calgary hold a public consultation to explore the issue. Although many influential citizens at the January meeting spoke for and against holding a plebiscite, Council decided not to allow a vote. Two factors played a role in the decision: (1) Council was concerned that they would face legal repercussions from VLT retailers if they ordered a vote without a petition; and (2) some members of Council were not convinced that a majority of the citizens wanted a vote on VLTs. As a result, Council indicated that they would allow citizens to vote only if a valid petition was received.

Although unsuccessful in convincing Council of the merits of a plebiscite, the events of the public hearing were critical to the development of the issue because (1) they brought together persons from both sides of the debate that would play pivotal roles in the petition drive; and (2) local and national media attention began to focus on the VLT issue in Calgary. This national attention on VLTs created a sense of the importance of the VLT petition among Calgarians.

Council's actions served to motivate those opposed to VLTs. By failing to allow a plebiscite, the council issued a challenge to citizens that if they felt this was an important issue, they would have to show it through a municipal petition. Those seeking a vote saw an opportunity to improve the quality of life in the city and participate in a historic democratic process. As a result of these motivations, *Calgarians for Democratic Choice (CDC)*, an organization composed of concerned citizens, was formed to provide the administrative support required to deliver a successful petition.

At the same time, local VLT retailers came together to form a Calgary Sub-Committee of Hospitality Alberta (HA). The challenge for HA was to ensure the preservation of: (1) Calgarians' right to play VLTs; and (2) the VLT retailers right to operate a business without interference from special interest groups. In addition to a media advertising campaign, HA launched a counter-petition against the CDC effort. Although never submitted to Council, this counter-petition provided HA with the opportunity to wage an information campaign against the CDC in the media. (The role and influence of Hospitality Alberta in the petition process is discussed in greater detail on page 18 of this report.)

Strategy and Planning

Strategy and planning for the petition was undertaken by the newly formed CDC. This phase was critical to the success of the petition campaign. Its importance lay in the development of key principles that would guide the campaign:

1. Maintain the "high road." The "high road" position was the pro-democracy position. CDC determined the petition should focus on providing the opportunity for a vote, and should not be adamantly anti-gambling or anti-VLT. Some people viewed the petition as trying to take away their right to play VLTs. The "freedom to vote" position became an important deflection of that criticism. Citizens were encouraged to sign the petition to enable them to decide whether they would vote for or against the machines in October.

2. Develop a broad-based coalition. Although the CDC was successful in uniting nearly all religious organizations in the city, it was important to remind the public that the issue had broad-based appeal. Although the church groups would play a critical role in the gathering of signatures, they were not the only groups in the city interested in a VLT vote. Other community associations such as seniors groups and social service agencies played important roles in the development of the strategy. A broad-based coalition would assist in deflecting criticism that the CDC represented a special interest group.

3. Educate the public. To encourage an accurate and informed debate on VLTs, the

CDC disseminated research findings to the public. Whenever possible, opportunities to promulgate information (e.g., conferences, meetings, presentations) regarding VLTs were pursued.

4. Focus on the impact of VLTs in the community. A primary motivation for the steering committee of the CDC was their concern that VLTs were negatively affecting the quality of life in Calgary. In order to communicate this message, they attempted to provide a forum for those stories that detailed the human impact elements of the debate. The CDC attempted to shift the focus away from numbers and funding toward people and community.

5. Provide public access to the petition. To ensure the campaign remained a grass-roots movement, all citizens were encouraged to volunteer and assist with the organization and the collection of signatures. A store-front location for the office was donated to the CDC to allow for drop-in traffic from the community.

6. Attention to detail. Great care was taken to ensure that the petition and the petition process were exactly consistent with the *Municipal Government Act* and would stand up to legal scrutiny after the campaign was over. In particular, this phase involved strategic planning regarding the petition wording and witness requirements.

Signature Gathering

The 60-day period over which the signatures were gathered (April 6 to June 4, 1998) can best be described as a hands-on learning experience. Over the course of the campaign, organizers and volunteers became skilled at adapting to a rapidly changing environment. Because a petition of this magnitude had never been completed in such a short period of time, there was no precedence from which to draw guidance.

The events of this period actually began in the weeks prior to the commencement of the 60-day petition drive. Before the petition drive began, thousands of petition forms were distributed to the city's religious organizations. The CDC concluded that these groups would deliver the bulk of the needed signatures and

therefore focused heavily on the education of these volunteers about the requirements of the petition. Just days before the campaign began, a historic meeting of 38 religious leaders from different denominations allowed the city's church community to nearly unanimously express their support for the petition and the willingness to involve their congregations in helping achieve the CDC's goals.

Early into the collection period, it became evident that a strategy would be required to deal with the public release of the number of signatures that had been gathered. Because it was not known how many actual signatures were collected but had not yet been turned in or when those signatures could be expected to be turned in to the office, the CDC relied on educated guesses to estimate the number actually signed at any given time. This uncertainty provided the CDC with the opportunity to tailor their estimates in a manner that would motivate volunteers.

Over the first 45 days of the campaign, the CDC overestimated the number of signatures in hand so as to encourage a sense of momentum that may or may not have been present. Over the last two weeks, when large numbers of petitions began to flood the office, the actual number of signatures was underestimated. This was done to ensure that volunteers continued to collect every name to prevent anyone from thinking their names were not required. The CDC wanted to "run through the finish line," not stop short of it.

Although embraced by some, the CDC encountered a number of barriers in making the petition accessible to the public. In particular, malls, grocery stores, and some office buildings did not want the petition-gatherers to interfere with the activities of their patrons and did not want to be associated with only one side of the debate. In addition, some mall tenants were also VLT retailers, and therefore the malls did not want to disrupt their business relationships.

Some community groups were also resistant to the CDC campaign as they may have been recipients of lottery funding and did not want to appear hypocritical. Some groups feared a VLT petition would eventually result in the loss of lottery revenues.

Motivating the average citizen to collect signatures proved a challenge. It is unknown whether it was the difficulty of the petition requirements or the VLT issue itself but several efforts that relied upon the community failed to produce a high number of signatures. In particular, the use of schools and communi-

ty centres as collection points for the 175,000 petitions distributed through newspaper inserts failed to produce a significant number of signatures. Average citizens were motivated to sign the petition, but many were not motivated to gather signatures themselves.

The newspaper distribution did allow the public to have direct access to the petition—an important goal of the campaign. Citizens may not have gone out and obtained signatures, but they did have the opportunity to read and reflect on the petition's purpose. This may have played a role in the success of the final phase of the campaign—collecting signatures door-to-door.

The door-to-door campaign was not an original strategy of the CDC. It grew out of the success that the CDC steering committee had in motivating the Mormon community and those Calgarians strongly committed to the cause. The CDC steering committee provided the drive, but most importantly, others came forward and ultimately carried the petition to success. Once the campaign moved into the communities, petition gathers reported having no trouble encouraging people to sign the petition. Although average citizens may have been reluctant to gather signatures, they were very willing to sign a petition at their door.

It was not until the results of the door-to-door campaign started to appear that the sense of optimism prevalent in the planning stages returned. As few as two weeks before the June 4 deadline, CDC organizers could be heard suggesting that "every name, no matter how many is important" and "50,000 will still make an impact." Although unwilling to talk of failure, it was clear that alternate plans were being considered in the event of a petition failure. These plans faded away in the wake of the door-to-door campaign.

In summary, the initial CDC approach to the petition appeared very much like a political campaign; a great deal of effort was spent trying to influence public opinion. They felt that an informed public would be motivated to seek out and sign the petitions. As the campaign progressed, the focus shifted to finding locations where potential signatures could be found. Although the campaign was orchestrated by the CDC in the beginning, it became very much a grassroots effort by the end of the 60 day period. As shown in Figure 3, signatures on the petition came from a broad variety of sources. Nearly 30% came from efforts in the community such as signatures gathered at work, association meetings, baseball games, at parks, etc. An additional 30% came from the community through the door-to-door campaign. The final 40% were delivered from the

various activities of the church congregations. In the final analysis, no single strategy or group dominated the process.

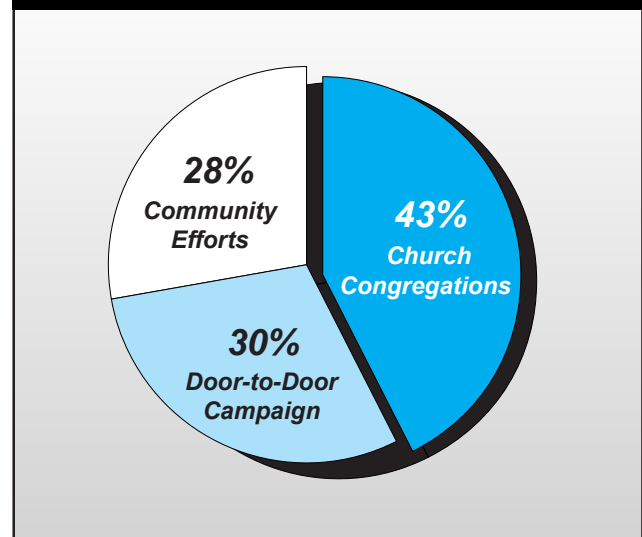
Post-Petition Events

The implications of the successful Calgary effort were felt locally and nationally. In the Calgary community, there was an initial shock at the sheer number of persons who signed the petition. In Edmonton, the results of the Calgary vote buoyed petition gathering efforts already underway and eventually contributed to the deliverance of a petition that was even more successful than Calgary's on a per capita basis. In recent weeks, many other Alberta communities have also followed the lead of these major centres.

Other provincial governments watched the results of Alberta's experience with VLT petitions with interest. Over the period of Calgary's VLT debate, the Ontario government first shifted and then abandoned its VLT plans. The New Brunswick government pulled its VLTs from corner stores. And in Manitoba, the government announced in July 1998 that its citizens would be granted the same rights as Alberta's citizens with respect to voting on VLTs. In the absence of any municipal petition legislation, the Manitoba Gaming Commission (MGC) determined a process for the delivery of community-driven petition drives. The MGC decided that if a community wanted to hold a plebiscite on the removal of VLTs, they could persuade or petition their local council.

FIGURE 3

Origin of Signatures Obtained



Source: Derived by Canada West Foundation from Calgarians for Democratic Choice database.

Despite a lack of legislation requiring it to do so, the government promised its citizens that it would adhere to the outcome of such a vote. Unlike Alberta, the Manitoba government decided that if any community voted to remove VLTs, they would lose part of their lottery funding.

Having fulfilled its mandate to organize a successful petition, *Calgarians for Democratic Choice* ceased to exist as of June 15, 1998. Democracy and the right to vote are no longer at issue in Calgary. The debate now turns to the merits of the VLTs themselves.

In June, Calgary's City Council successfully validated the petition and put a plebiscite question on the October municipal ballot that will ask Calgarians if they want the provincial government to remove VLTs from their city. It remains to be seen what new organization will spring up from the ranks of the petitioners to wage that battle.

Who and What Influenced the Outcome?

1. Public Opinion

Over the course of the petition campaign, Canada West undertook a series of public opinion polls. The first survey of 500 respondents was administered in April immediately before the signature gathering began. A second survey of 451 respondents was administered in June following the delivery of the successful petition. Both surveys were conducted over the telephone to randomly selected Calgarians. The April survey has a confidence interval of +/-4.5% 19 times out of 20. The June survey is accurate to +/-5% 19 times out of 20.

The following analysis will consider public opinion regarding VLTs and the petition in Calgary. Four areas will form the basis of this review: (1) public participation in the VLT debate; (2) who signed the petition; (3) how citizens will vote; and (4) alternative solutions to the VLT issue.

1. Public participation in the VLT Debate

The notion of citizen participation in decision making lies at the root of the VLT debate in Calgary. As Figure 4 indicates, more than 9 in 10 respondents (93%) agree with their right to decide important local issues through direct voting. In addition, nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents agreed that the VLT issue deserves the opportunity to be put to a vote. It is this public sentiment that led to a valid petition drive.

2. Who signed the petition

Of those surveyed, 43% indicated that they had the opportunity to sign the VLT petition (Figure 5). This level of coverage

reflects the success of the efforts of CDC volunteers to provide a broad range of locations at which Calgarians could participate in the process. Of those that were approached, nearly seven in ten respondents indicated that they did indeed sign the petition.

The reality of the campaign was that delivering a successful petition relied upon the ability to give as many persons as possible the opportunity to decide if they wanted to sign. Given that the petition asked only for a vote on the removal of VLTs, it is not surprising that seven in ten decided to sign. As mentioned previously, Albertans have a rich history of seeking opportunities to settle issues through direct votes. The CDC petition appealed to these traditional values.

Survey data also demonstrated that some demographic groups were more willing to hold a vote. Groups that favoured putting the VLT issue to a vote included: unem-

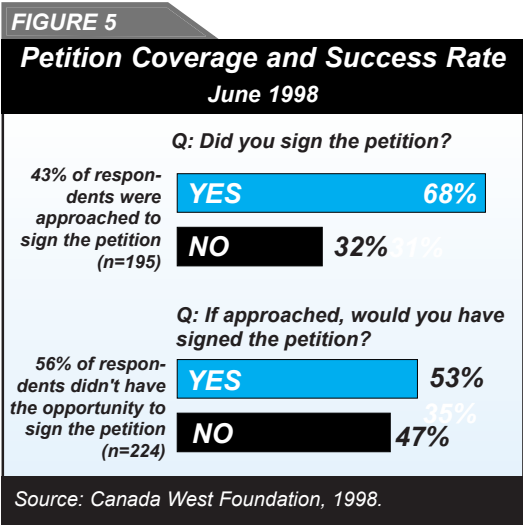
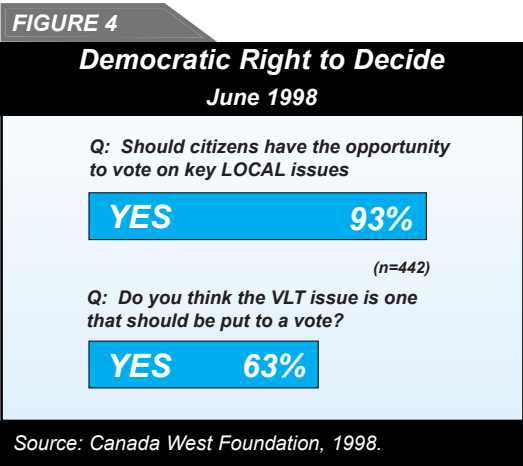
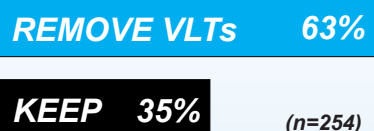


FIGURE 6

Petitioners' Voting Preference April 1998

Q: Given that you would like a vote on VLTs, how do you think you will vote?



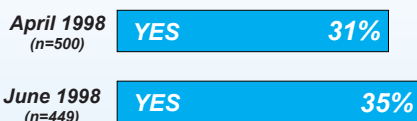
Source: Canada West Foundation, 1998.

Note: Includes only those respondents wanting a vote.

FIGURE 7

Scope of Problem Gambling April & June 1998

Q: Do you know someone that is a problem gambler? That is, they spend more than they can afford while gambling.



Source: Canada West Foundation, 1998.

ployed and lower income persons, those with post-secondary education, women, the youngest (18-24) and oldest (65+), and those with a religious affiliation.

The fact that a person signed the petition asking for a vote does not mean that they will vote to remove the VLTs. As shown in Figure 6, 63% of respondents that indicated they want a vote said they will vote to remove the VLTs, while 35% said they will vote to retain them. Based on these data it is likely that just over one-third of those that signed the petition will vote to keep the machines in October. Clearly, the petition's success was based on both the democratic principles it represented and growing anti-VLT sentiment.

Many factors influenced an individual's decision to sign or not sign the petition. One notable factor in determining preference for holding a vote is whether the respondent indicated that they know someone that is a problem gambler. As shown in Figure 7, more than one in three

Calgarians know of a person that is a problem gambler. These respondents were significantly more likely to have expressed a desire to hold a vote.

Figure 8 outlines some additional factors that influenced the desire to have a vote. A significant motivation for wanting a vote is the belief that problems associated with gambling in Alberta have been increasing over the last few years. Nine in ten (91%) of those that wanted a vote believed that problems were increasing. Among those that did not want a vote, the right to play a VLT was the strongest motivator for their view. Nearly all respondents (95%) that did not want a vote listed the right to play VLTs as a primary reason.

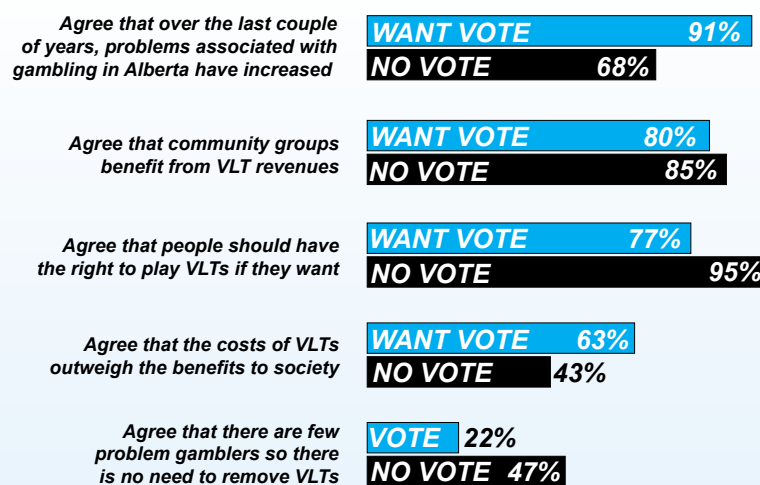
The "right to vote versus right to play" argument played a critical role in the outcome of the debate. When asked why they signed the petition, the largest number of respondents (40%) listed "the democratic right to decide" as their primary reason for signing. For those who did not sign the petition, the primary motivator (56%) for *not signing* the petition was "the freedom of choice to play the VLTs." The clash between these two notions of freedom stood at the centre of the VLT petition campaign.

3. How people will vote in the plebiscite

As indicated, some people signed the petition but intend to vote to keep the machines. Therefore, the successful petition should not be viewed as an indicator of plebiscite results. To shed some light on the possible outcome of the coming VLT vote, both surveys asked respondents to indicate how they would vote in October. As shown in Figure 9, the likely outcome of the VLT vote is very much in doubt. In April, 41.8% of respondents would vote to remove VLTs

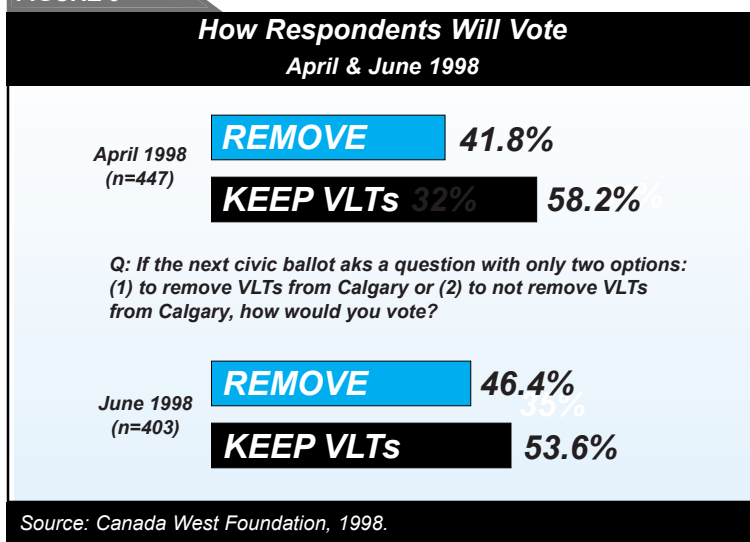
FIGURE 8

Why A Vote on VLTs? April 1998



Source: Canada West Foundation, 1998.

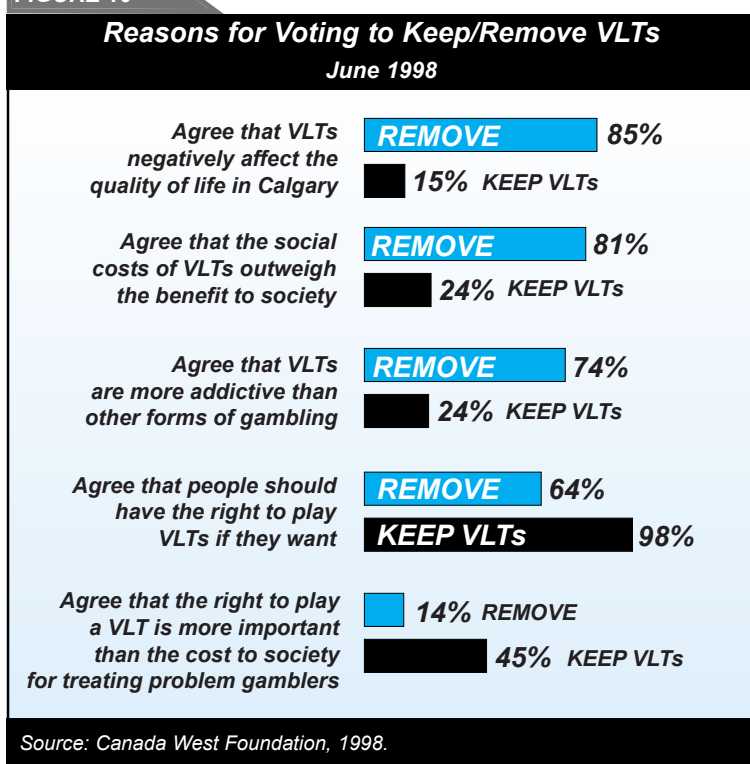
FIGURE 9



and 58.2% would vote to retain the machines. Following the petition campaign, public opinion had shifted 4.6% in favour of removing the VLTs. As a result, public opinion on removing VLTs is nearly an even split; 46.4% of respondents would vote to remove VLTs and 53.6% would vote to retain them.

As a result of the divided public sentiment, efforts prior to the coming vote will likely focus on both sides trying to motivate their supporters to get out and vote. Based on the proven ability to motivate its supporters, those with concerns about the impact of VLTs would appear to have a natural advantage. In

FIGURE 10



addition, as the majority of those that signed the petition are also against retaining the machines, the petition itself provides an excellent database of names from which to draw support.

Figure 10 outlines some of the respondents' rationale for wanting to keep or remove VLTs. The strongest motivator for individuals wanting to remove the machines is a belief that the VLTs are harming the quality of life in Calgary; 85% of persons that want VLTs removed agree that they reduce quality of life compared with only 15% of those not wanting the machines removed. The size of this discrepancy indicates that quality of life is a strong motivator.

Other factors strongly influencing a vote to remove the machines are beliefs that: (1) the machines are more addictive than other forms of gambling; and (2) the social costs of the machines outweigh any benefits.

For those that would vote to keep VLTs, the freedom of choice argument provides the most important rationale. Nearly all respondents (98%) that said they will vote to keep the machines also believe in the right to play the machines if they so choose. Among the respondents that would vote to retain VLTs, there was a sentiment that government and special interest groups should not try to force their will onto others. The democratic principle of majority rule was seen as a threat to individual liberties. For many, then, banning VLTs is the first step on the slippery slope toward more general prohibition. As one survey respondent noted, "I believe people should have the right to freedom of choice, just like with cigarettes and alcohol."

Some respondents were also concerned that once the VLT revenue stream is removed, there must be some replacement source of revenue. A few respondents indicated that they would prefer if government generated revenue from those willing or foolish enough to play the machines.

Persons willing to vote to remove the machines indicated a general concern for the well-being of others as the main rationale for their vote. Many were concerned about the

effect that VLT machines have on those who cannot control their desire to play. Some respondents said that they have seen the harm that VLTs can cause, and the money lost from people who can't afford it. As one person noted, "I don't think government should be promoting and reaping the rewards off the backs of the poor and those who cannot afford to gamble." In general, respondents indicated that government should not raise money from those who cannot help themselves.

Finally, demographic groups that are more likely to vote to remove VLTs include: persons 50+, females, persons with less than a high school education, those with annual incomes between \$20,000 and \$40,000, and those with knowledge of a problem gambler. Those groups that are likely to vote to retain the machines include 18-24 year olds, males, those with no religious affiliation, high school graduates (without advanced education), those with an annual income of \$60,000-\$80,000, and those that have previously played a VLT.

4. Alternative solutions to the VLT issue

The VLT debate in Alberta has been focused on an all or nothing solution to the VLT issue because that is the only option that has been provided by the Premier. However, neither position appears to reflect the manner in which citizens would like to deal with VLTs. Many agree that the machines may be a problem, but abolition is not the preferred answer. A more consensual solution appears to lie somewhere between the two extremes.

The June survey collected data on other possible

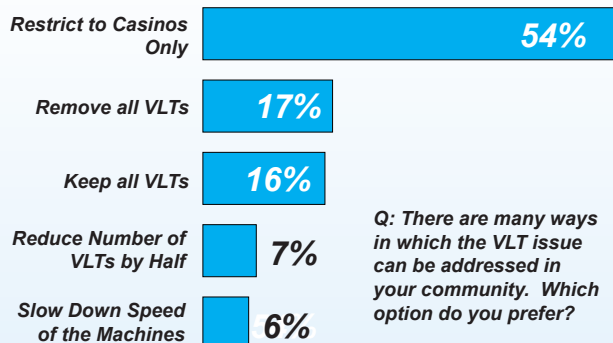
options for dealing with VLTs. As shown in Figure 11, the overwhelmingly preferred option for Calgarians is to restrict the VLTs to casinos (54%). This majority view represents a "third option" for many respondents. When asked how they would vote in a plebiscite with the three options, 58% would vote to move VLTs to the casinos, 25% would vote to keep VLTs, and 17% would vote to remove VLTs. It is not the availability of VLTs in Calgary that is the problem for the respondents, it is the *access* to the machines on non-gambling designated premises.

When asked to rank a second choice for resolving the VLT issue, "reduce the number by half" was the preferred choice of respondents. This option may appeal to respondents as it would still allow for the freedom of choice while reducing the possible harm to the community. Interestingly, the least preferred method (6%) of dealing with the VLT issue was to slow down the speed of the machines. This is the option currently being tested by the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission as the preferred method of dealing with the machines despite the fact that it appears to have no significant support among the public.

Finally, as shown in Figure 12, respondents believe that the loss of revenue associated with the removal of VLTs will be minimized because of: (1) the additional economic activity that will be *diverted away* from the VLTs (72%); and (2) the additional revenue that will be *diverted to* other forms of gambling (45%). The least popular alternatives are: (1) tax increase (although 14% did prefer additional taxes to VLTs); and (2) a reduction in community grant funding (29%).

FIGURE 11

Preferred Method for Dealing with VLTs June 1998

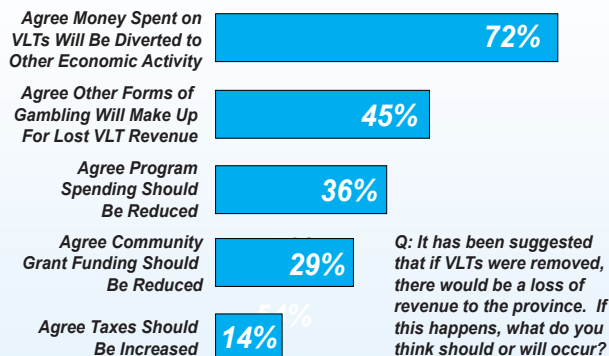


Source: Canada West Foundation, 1998.

Note: Respondents could indicate only one option.

FIGURE 12

What Will Happen Without the VLTs... June 1998



Source: Canada West Foundation, 1998.

Note: Respondents could agree with more than one option.

II. Media Addiction July 1997-July 1998

To gauge the VLT story in the media, a comprehensive collection of newspaper clippings including stories, editorials, illustrations, letters, and advertisements from local Calgary print media was analyzed.

The following is a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the media coverage regarding gambling issues as the average Calgarian may have seen it. *The Calgary Herald*, *Calgary Sun*, *The Globe and Mail* and magazines like *Alberta Report* make up the bulk of the collection. Only those publications which are readily accessible to Calgarians are included in the discussion.

1. Categorization of Articles

For the purpose of content analysis, the clippings were counted and categorized using a 38 point classification system. The classification was segmented to ensure as little subjectivity as possible. When determining whether a regular news article (as opposed to an editorial) portrayed one side of an issue in a more positive light than the other, the following factors were considered: sources used by the author of the article, the order in which the information was organized within the article, and the percentage of space allotted to each side of the issue.

2. Frequency

"The file was heavy enough to give a beefy linebacker a hernia." Paul Stanway
Editor-in-Chief, *Edmonton Sun*.

An Edmonton journalist made an interesting point when he characterized the VLT clipping file at his newspaper in the above manner. The frequency of VLT coverage in Alberta over the past year has exploded in quantity. Over a 12 and a half month period Canada West collected 604 articles focusing on gambling issues—including the petition drive. At this rate, Calgarians were exposed to almost two gambling articles per day.

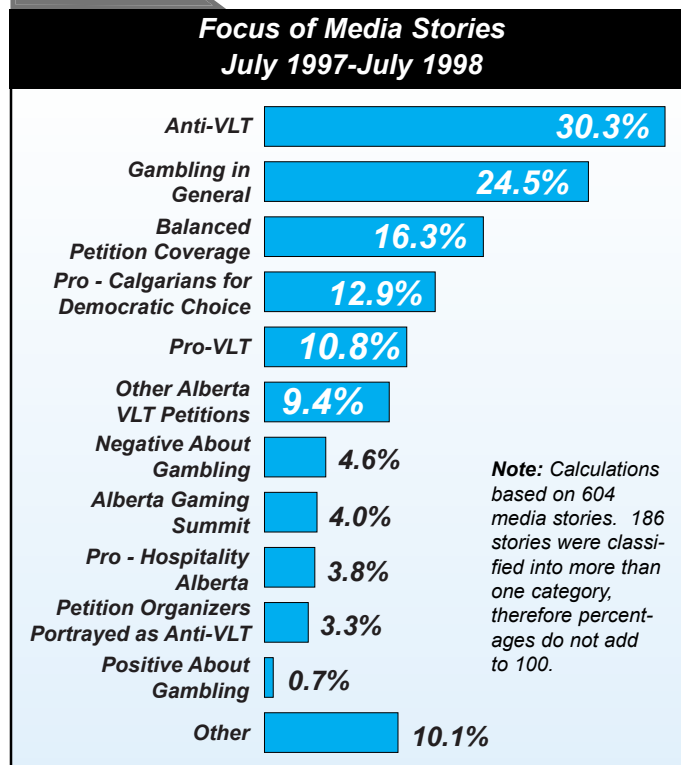
From the casual mention of VLTs in loosely-related stories to full-page features about VLTs and the public pressure that surrounds them, Alberta journalists have been intrigued by VLTs since their introduction. The issue has all the elements of a classic news story: human interest, money, and

possible government mismanagement. Without a doubt, the gambling question in Alberta increased in intensity thanks to a diligent media corps interested in news about elevated gambling rates and increased government revenues. As admitted by Don Martin of the *Calgary Herald*, the media was "addicted" to the VLT issue (*Calgary Herald*, February 9, 1998).

3. Significant Events

During the year leading up to the Calgary petition drive, there were three significant media events that hit the news stands: the Premier's criticism of churches implying they were hypocritical to accept lottery funding (late January 1998); the decision of Calgary City Council to require a petition (mid-February 1998); and the announcement of the April Gaming Summit (February 1998). The decision to hold the Summit was perhaps deemed more newsworthy than the Summit itself. Journalists throughout the province characterized the decision as a direct response to the VLT debate, referring to it as a "VLT Summit" (*Calgary Herald*). The government dismissed this label and characterized the Summit as a follow-up to the work of the 1995 Lotteries Review Committee.

FIGURE 13



Source: Canada West Foundation, 1998.

Note: Due to the imbalance between the collection of print and electronic media (radio, television), electronic media are not included in any story count statistics.

The primary story in the media's eye from April – June 1998 was the petition drive and the campaign waged between CDC and Hospitality Alberta (HA). Leading up to the petition launch, the *Calgary Herald* began a feature series lead-in complete with special logo and text reading "Countdown: A vote on VLTs?" News during the month of April was filled with stories regarding the success of the CDC petition drive and HA's counter-petition.

4. VLT Coverage

Of the VLT-specific coverage during the time period monitored, 68% was anti-VLT in nature (see Figure 14). This ranged from stories describing someone who committed suicide as a result of a VLT addiction to stories about businesses who decided to remove VLTs from their bar/hotel. Typically, the media was interested in stories about government studies which show the impact of VLTs on gambling rates and stories about plans for ever-increasing government VLT revenues.

Stories portraying VLTs in a positive light usually referred to community funding resulting from lottery play, or to the argument that VLTs were no different than other forms of gambling.

5. Petition Coverage

Of the coverage directly relating to the Calgary

FIGURE 14

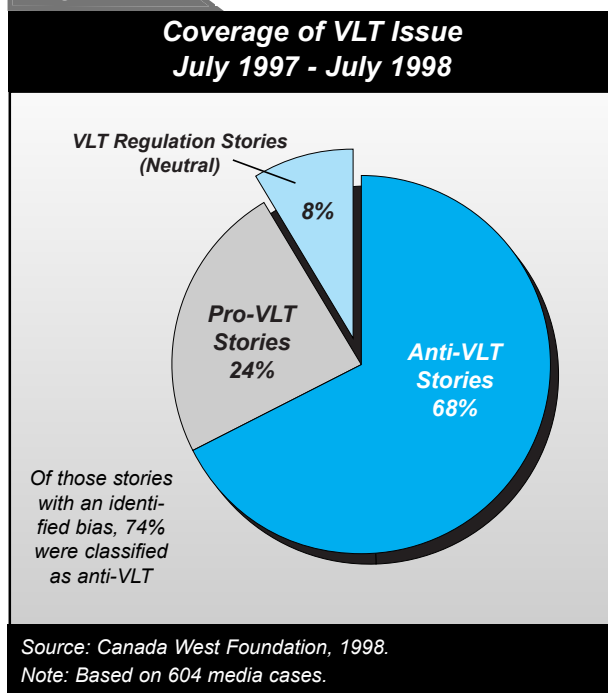
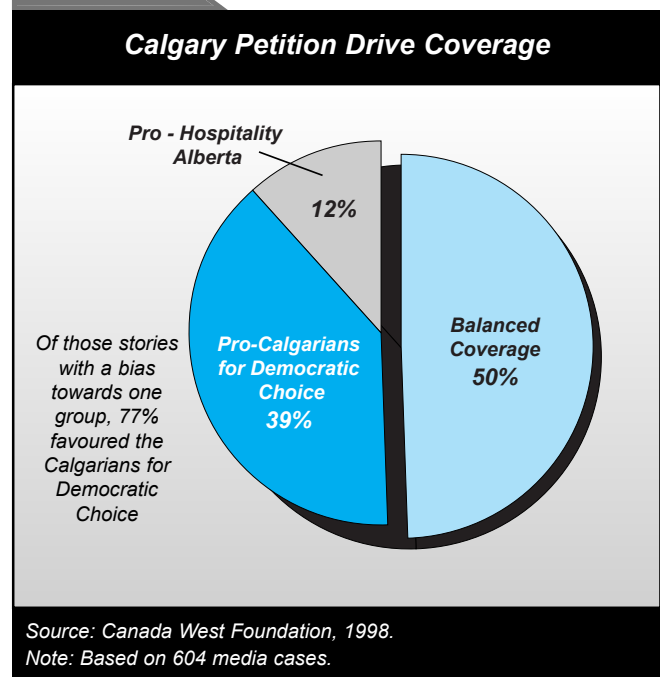


FIGURE 15



petition drive, the media treated the story in a manner that was favourable to the CDC, and the anti-VLT sentiment. Fifty per cent of the petition coverage was relatively balanced (see Figure 15), with more than half of the 'balanced coverage' linking the CDC petition drive to VLT issues such as gambling addiction or government revenues. Of the remaining coverage, 39% primarily provided information regarding CDC and their arguments or organization. Of this 'pro-CDC' coverage, 44% was of an editorial nature, or an advertisement. The other 12% of the petition coverage was primarily focused on HA or the decision not to sign the CDC petition. Of this 'pro-HA' coverage about half was editorial or paid advertising.

A likely explanation for this imbalance was the nature of the campaign itself. The principal newsmaker was the CDC. The coverage achieved by HA was normally in response to CDC action, with the exception of the launch of a counter-petition. As the petition campaign progressed, HA's involvement appeared to dwindle and CDC's role as the principal newsmaker intensified.

From the outset of the petition drive, there was considerable confusion in the news regarding the mandate of CDC. This resulted from the decision of HA to launch a counter-petition to the CDC campaign. The counter-petition, designed to highlight the benefits of the status quo, was successful in sharpening the image of CDC as an anti-VLT group in the media—contrary to CDC's intentions. A good portion of the articles identified CDC or its supporters as anti-VLT. Both

groups attempted to classify themselves as advocates of free choice. The CDC argued that the choice should be expressed through direct democracy, and HA argued choice should be expressed in citizens' day-to-day decisions. Because the petition news in the media became so closely tied to gambling revenue and problem gambling statistics, the distinction desired by CDC was never fully achieved.

7. Human Interest

It is difficult to measure the impact news stories have on public opinion, but those stories with a human interest element are worth considering. Journalists choose to tell news stories with an aspect of human interest for many reasons. A touch of the human element can increase the reader's ability to understand an issue, and it can make the story more interesting. It is safe to say that journalists choose human interest stories because they know a greater level of attention is paid to them.

To this end, the media covered 11 stories about someone who committed suicide as a result of VLT addiction and 14 stories about individual(s) who committed crimes because of VLTs. Although the number of these types of articles seem low, one can assume that they had a disproportionate impact on public opinion. It is important to note that the largest category of clippings, based on the entire collection, were the ones which portrayed VLTs as a negative aspect of society (14.1% of *all* clippings). In comparison, positive human interest stories about benefits of lottery winnings or play were markedly few. Of the 604 stories collected, only two were about a happy lottery winner.

8. Metaphors

The most oft-used metaphor to describe VLTs is to call them the "crack-cocaine" of gambling. The metaphor, often prefaced by "as described by experts....," was originally coined by Dr. Robert Hunter, a gambling research specialist from Nevada. Dr. Hunter used the metaphor to describe the speed at which a person could go from being in-control to bottoming-out with a VLT addiction. This short period of time was found to be unique from other forms of gambling in the same way that crack-cocaine is differentiated from other illicit drugs. During the past year it was not unusual for a news story to use the crack-cocaine metaphor for VLTs as a parenthetical definition; there are 26 mentions of it in the news collection. The metaphor is never explained in its original context, leaving the reader to interpret a broad set of meanings.

Another common thread of media coverage surrounding VLTs was the image that the government of Alberta is "addicted" to revenues. Often described by government officials as a necessary revenue stream, this issue received 8.3% of the total coverage monitored. Editorial writers, in particular, declared that the worst VLT addict of all was the provincial government. This argument had been well used during the final stages of the petition drive. The revenue addiction metaphor was among the strongest negative language used when discussing VLTs.

9. Additional Issues

Of course, one cannot assume that Calgarians generate all public opinions from the coverage provided by the print media. However, the sheer volume of the coverage surrounding the gambling issue in the Calgary press is indicative of—in the least—a media interest in the issue and—at most—a public opinion issue in Calgary. Throughout the course of the media debate, spanning five years now, the media has acted as a voice for those who were not mobilized to voice their own concerns (e.g., addicted gamblers, community groups facing loss of lottery funding). The dynamic nature of the information about VLTs (e.g., large revenues and human tragedy elements) acts as a generator to produce a heightened media interest in the issue.

10. Summary

Of the media coverage pertaining to VLTs, gambling, and gambling policy in Alberta, the following conclusions can be made:

1. there was an abundance of coverage of the issue in 12 months prior to the CDC petition campaign;
2. the coverage of the petition campaign drive was favourable to CDC;
3. the coverage of the petition campaign drive developed a core of media spokespeople, lending to the interest the media fostered for this story; and
4. the majority of articles with VLTs as the main focus portray VLTs in a negative light.

The desire of the media to delve into the VLT debate signifies that, in many instances, they have acted like participants in the process, not the reporters of it. Partly because the CDC was the principal newsmaker

in the issue, and partly because of the classic news elements of the story, the media in Calgary provided a platform for the CDC to make arguments for their position time and again. There is little doubt that the media frenzy surrounding the Calgary petition drive influenced the support Calgarians demonstrated for the petition. The heightened interest in the VLT issue associated with the on-going news stories allowed the CDC to continuously have its message in the minds of Calgarians throughout the campaign.

III. VLT Retailers

In the absence of a government campaign to promote VLTs, bar owners and operators rallied to the cause to stand up for VLTs. From their perspective, it was up to them to provide Calgarians with 'the other side of the story' on the VLT front. Hospitality Alberta carried out two main actions to promote VLTs in Calgary: a counter-petition and an advertising campaign.

Representatives from HA, in particular Calgary Chair Al Browne and personable Silver Dollar Action Centre Operator Frank Sisson, were active spokespeople in the community throughout the CDC petition campaign, and prior to its launch. The first of these appearances, and an important one, was HA's presentation in support of VLTs at Calgary City Council's first hearing on the VLT issue in January, 1998.

The campaign was well organized. Media reports described that VLT operators were encouraged to contribute \$325 per machine to the cause and that a major advertising campaign was in the works. Unlike the CDC, actions on behalf of the operators were carried out by those that had a history of working together to promote their industry interests. Despite media reports to the contrary, Mr. Browne describes the bar owners coalition as a consolidated group.

"You don't get a ground swell of people, but you always have a strong corps of people who are interested," said Mr. Browne.

1. Counter-petition

The idea to counter-petition was introduced in February by Mr. Sisson. According to Mr. Browne, the decision to counter-petition was based on two reasons: (1) to provide Calgarians with a choice about the VLT issue; and (2) to secure media attention for HA.

Mr. Browne said that it was not clear to HA that CDC would promote both sides of the issue. The plan to

counter-petition arose when HA organizers determined CDC's campaign would be one-sided, in opposition to VLTs. The counter-petition, which was launched on the same day as the CDC petition, was not intended to be a legal petition, but only a device to raise public knowledge about HA's perception of the VLT situation. "We felt people should have a choice," said Browne. "Our petition was for informational purposes so people would sit back and say "there are two petitions, there must be two sides."

As described in the media section of this report, the introduction of the counter-petition may have clouded the issue more than clarified it in the minds of Calgarians. Considerable confusion surrounded the meanings of both petitions. If HA had decided to simply campaign against signing the CDC petition there would presumably have been less confusion. Considering HA's goal was not to derail the CDC's petition, but simply to provide the alternative view, they felt the counter-petition was a success.

2. Advertising

During the first four weeks of April, HA obtained and published lists of community organizations and groups who received funding from lottery grants. Parts of this information were contained in HA's "Know the Facts" advertising campaign. Mr. Browne said the campaign generated interest and was pleased with its effect. "It had a huge impact," he said. "Particularly the information on the benefactors of public funds. I don't think people realized how much good was being done."

Calgary Petition Questions

The Calgarians for Democratic Choice petition question:

"WE PETITION THE CITY OF CALGARY COUNCIL TO: (1) HOLD A VOTE TO GIVE THE ELECTORS OF CALGARY THE OPPORTUNITY TO DECIDE IF THEY WANT VIDEO LOTTERY TERMINALS TO BE REMOVED FROM OUR CITY; AND (2) SUBMIT THE RESULTS OF THAT VOTE TO THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA."

The Hospitality Alberta counter-petition question:

"We respectfully petition Calgary City Council to: ignore any petition which would threaten those rights and cause an unreasonable interference in an existing legal contract between the Province of Alberta and the Licensed Operators who have VLT's on their properties."

Source: Calgarians for Democratic Choice and Hospitality Alberta
Note: Original emphasis retained.

On the basis of public response, HA has determined that both the counter-petition campaign and the advertising campaign were successful. Although the counter petition failed to generate a significant number of signatures, HA organizers are satisfied that they were able to stimulate the discussion and raise awareness of the benefits of VLTs and other lottery programs.

3. How Hospitality Alberta Saw the Campaign

HA viewed the petition campaign as Calgarians expressing their desire to make a decision themselves. To them, the high number of petition signatures signified that Calgarians want a vote on the VLT issue and nothing more. There were, however, two aspects of frustration for HA: (1) the execution of the CDC petition drive; and (2) the media coverage of the campaign.

According to HA, the pitch used to encourage petitioners to sign the CDC petition was misleading. Petition-gatherers encouraged people to sign the petition because it would "give the opportunity for a vote," and technically that is what the CDC petition was designed to achieve. However, Mr. Browne would have preferred petition-gatherers to be more forthcoming about their motivations. It is for this reason that HA is confident about the upcoming municipal election. They feel that the 120,000 petitioners do not translate into 120,000 people who wish to have VLTs removed. The public opinion data presented in Figure 6 (page 12) supports this notion as one third of those who want a vote intend to vote to retain the machines.

HA was frustrated with the media coverage surrounding the campaign because of its bias and tendency to focus on negative VLT stories—particularly human interest stories. As outlined in this report's media analysis section, the frequent media coverage regarding VLTs was often negative. Mr. Browne contends media coverage of this nature turned the VLT issue into something "greater than it is."

4. Looking Ahead

In preparation for the October municipal election HA members have been posturing to represent the alternative view again. Throughout the October campaign, one can expect HA to re-emphasize the desire of Calgarians to decide for themselves about their own actions. The "right to play" argument will likely form the basis for the upcoming debate.

IV. Government Actions

Throughout the year leading up to the Calgary petition drive, the government of Alberta failed to show leadership on the VLT issue. They appeared content to allow the VLT petitions to run their course with minimal interference. However, as petition pressure mounted, the government became an increasingly strong and vocal supporter of its VLT program. Support was not expressed through any formal public relations campaign, but rather through random comments and actions of government officials and departments. The following eight points illustrate the development of the provincial government's policy:

1. Province-wide Jurisdiction Shuffle. In 1998, the government's policy remained that each city and town could decide by plebiscite whether or not VLTs should remain within their municipality. Frustration with this position was felt throughout the province because municipalities were forced to deal with an issue obviously falling within provincial jurisdiction.

2. Hypocrisy Comment (January 1998). In early January the Premier made headlines when he attached a note to a Lottery Grant recipient in his constituency, St. Stephen's Ukrainian Catholic Church. The Premier questioned the group's motivation for accepting money when they did not approve of how the money was generated. The church returned the funds. Through his actions, Premier Klein publicly questioned all community groups and churches about their justification for accepting lottery grant money when they oppose the VLT program. The actions and comments of the Premier polarized the VLT debate and demonstrated his frustration with the issue.

3. Gambling Summit Announcement (February 1998). In February, the Premier made a surprise announcement that the province would host a gaming and lotteries summit in April. The most surprising aspect of this announcement was the sense of urgency that surrounded the event. This urgency was expressed by the government despite having made no prior references to any upcoming consultation processes. This call for a summit indicated that the government was, if not concerned, definitely interested in re-evaluating Alberta's gambling policies.

4. Slowing down VLTs (March 1998). As a signal that the government recognized VLTs are a unique form of gambling, the Legislature voted to slow down

VLTs in March. It was this decision that sparked government officials to warn of spending cuts in light of reduced lottery revenues although it was unclear how slower machines would affect revenues.

5. A Province-Wide Vote? (April 1998). Veering from the traditional government response, Premier Klein commented in early April that if the Gaming Summit delegates said so, there might be a province-wide vote on VLTs. However, Economic Development Minister Pat Nelson steadfastly adhered to the initial government policy of municipal plebiscites. As it turned out, the Gaming Summit never really addressed the issue of a province wide vote which kept petition groups like CDC guessing as to whether the government would render their efforts moot.

6. Alternate Scenarios (June 1998). At the end of June, various scenarios were floated by the government regarding what would happen if VLTs were removed. The most newsworthy of these was the possibility of establishing large tourist casinos in Alberta. Since then, little has been announced regarding a future without VLTs. One thing, however, has been made clear: the government views a limited or mass removal of VLTs and, more importantly their revenues, as a hole in their budget—a hole that will be felt by all recipients of government funding.

7. Lotteries and Gaming Summit Results (July 1998). The government decided to comply with all eight of the Lottery and Gaming Summit Report recommendations put forth by Summit Chair Harley Johnson. Because no consensus was established regarding VLT policy at the Summit, no action was taken by the government regarding VLTs. And, no province-wide vote was considered. In early June, Premier Klein had reverted back to the government's original policy of endorsing municipal plebiscites.

8. Infrastructure Funding (July 1998). In late July, the government reinforced the notion that VLT funding is a critical part of Alberta's budget. The province announced a one-time allocation of \$130 million of forecasted lottery money to improve infrastructure in Alberta cities. Throughout the allocation discussions the message from the government was clear: if not for VLT revenue, the infrastructure funding could not be guaranteed.

Although there has never been a concerted effort on behalf of the government to promote VLTs, government action has solidified a consistent message that lottery funding benefits all Albertans. As the municip-

pal election nears, we will likely learn more examples of the benefits of lottery funding in Alberta.

Conclusion

This review of the the VLT debate suggests that there were three overarching factors that ultimately led to the successful petition drives in Calgary, Edmonton and other locations.

First, citizens saw that there was a link between VLTs and the local community. Both the positive and negative impacts associated with the machines were directly felt within the populace. The knowledge of an individual who had a problem with VLT gambling or the funding that a local organization received from lottery money heightened the importance of the issue among citizens. The opportunity to directly affect a change in VLT policy in their community appealed to petitioners.

Second, there was a sense among citizens that government may no longer be able to make sound policy regarding VLTs. They had become too absorbed with the revenue brought in by the machines. Citizens saw a plebiscite as an opportunity to act on behalf of the government. There existed a sense that the government had become fixated on the VLT revenues

Finally, as citizens struggled with the incongruent freedoms of the "right to play" versus the "right to vote," the balance weighed in favour of Western Canada's democratic traditions. Now that the democratic issue is resolved, it remains to be seen in October whether a persuasive argument can be made to compete with the notion of the "right to play." ■

The Canada West Foundation is a non-profit, non-partisan research and educational organization active in economic, social, and public policy studies. It is a registered Canadian charitable organization incorporated under federal charter. The Foundation's offices are located in Calgary, Alberta.

The Canada West Foundation is directed to accomplish three prime objectives:

- 1. To initiate and conduct research into the economic and social characteristics and potentials of the West and North within a national and international context;*
- 2. To educate individuals regarding the West's regional economic and social contributions to the Canadian federation; and*
- 3. To act as a catalyst for informed debate.*