

Push is on to stop greyhound racing in Iowa

By Tim Rohwer

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Efforts are underway to put a stop – permanently – to dog racing in Iowa, including the dog track in Council Bluffs.

“It’s not a business model that can sustain itself on its own,” said Bo Guidry, executive director of Harrah’s and Horseshoe casinos. “Since 1991, wagering in Iowa on live greyhounds has declined by 95 percent. We are being forced to subsidize an industry that has passed its time.”

The local dog track, Bluffs Run, is located at the Horseshoe Casino along Interstate 80.

Jerry Crawford, a counsel for the greyhound racing industry responded, “That is nothing new. This has been done the last five years, and every year it failed in both (legislative) houses.”

A local lawmaker, Rep. Mary Ann Hanusa, R-Council Bluffs, said she is crafting a bill that could be voted upon this year in the Iowa Legislature that would end dog racing.

On Monday evening, the Council Bluffs City Council will vote on a resolution in support of efforts to repeal any state law that requires live greyhound racing as a condition of obtaining or retaining a gaming license.

“Dog racing is not being utilized as it originally was,” said Councilman Al Ringgenberg. “It’s losing revenue.”

“There should be no requirement for our license to have dog racing,” Guidry said.

When the state allowed casino gaming in 1994, having a pari-mutuel track was a requirement for a gaming company to build a land-based casino such as the Horseshoe. In 2007, the Legislature changed Iowa law and began allowing land-based casinos without an associated pari-mutuel track, though state action is needed for casinos such as Horseshoe to end dog racing.

Guidry said that for nearly two decades his casino has had to provide up to \$10 million a year in subsidies to keep the track running with nothing in return.

“Greyhound racing was in decline even before those subsidies,” added Doug Struyk, an attorney representing the Horseshoe Casino. “What’s more, of the money that comes in, 38 percent of the purse monies go to out-of-state dog owners and of the 62 percent staying in Iowa, 92 percent goes to just 25 Iowans.

In the last five years, 28 tracks around the country closed, Struyk said.

Crawford responded that, “When somebody races in the state, they spend money in the state.”

This includes buying food for all the dogs, hiring local veterinarians and other necessities.

“All of this goes into the local economy,” Crawford said.

About 45 people are employed in some fashion by the dog track, according to Guidry, adding he would employ them elsewhere within the casino if the dog track were closed.

The land where the track is located, between eight and 10 acres, could be used for more productive economic means, the casino chief said.

“We’re trying to rebuild that area,” then-Mayor Tom Hanafan said at a forum last month.

It was dog racing that helped revitalize the local economy during struggling times, Crawford said.

“They have done everything they can to kill this local industry,” he said. “They let the facility deteriorate. When the Legislature has been asked to choose between local jobs and the economic benefits or send money back to Las Vegas, they’ve made the right decision.”