

VIDEO: Plainville track owner urges end to simulcasting at Raynham

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BOSTON — Dog racing opponents called on lawmakers Tuesday to completely fulfill the will of voters by ending simulcast wagering on dog races conducted in other states while horsemen and a Plainridge thoroughbred track owner said legislators this summer should cut off simulcasting signals to Raynham Park, essentially denying the former dog track of its only remaining gambling product.

During occasionally pointed testimony before the Consumer Protection and Professional Licensure Committee, lawmakers, advocates and racetrack industry officials staked out ground on legislative proposals as chieftains of another committee eyes expanded gambling bills with implications for racetracks struggling to pull in patrons.

Gary Piontkowski, owner of Plainridge Racecourse, urged committee members to extend the law that allows racetracks to take bets on races simulcast from out-of-state venues, but only for racetracks that offer live racing.

Plainridge and Suffolk Downs offer live horse racing while voters in 2008 stripped Raynham Park of its ability to run dog races by adopting an initiative petition promoted by activists opposed to the mistreatment of greyhounds. Another dog track, Wonderland Park, closed last year after talks on an expanded gambling bill collapsed.

Describing Raynham Park as an off-track betting parlor, Piontkowski said simulcasting was envisioned 20 years ago as a way to help racetracks and the farms that feed the industry. "That should not be part of a simulcasting bill," Piontkowski said, referring to Raynham Park, one of his competitors. "Simulcast relates to live racing."

In written testimony, Sen. Richard Ross (R-Wrentham) said live racing tracks in Massachusetts support 1,600 families while racetracks without live racing "save upwards of \$5 million in operating expenses, payroll and paid purses." Ross said, "For these reasons, simulcasting should be extended for live racing facilities alone."

Ross said state laws say that racetracks must conduct live racing for 100 days in order to receive simulcasting rights. "When live greyhound racing was eliminated from the Commonwealth in 2008, several steps were taken to mitigate the negative economic effects that the dog tracks would sustain as a result of this action," Ross wrote. "One of these measures was to waive the live racing prerequisite for simulcasting. I believe 3 years has been enough time for race tracks that once conducted live dog racing to recover."

Testifying for the Harness Horseman's Association of New England, William Abdelnour said the group supports the Ross bill and opposes allowing simulcasting operations without live racing. "The current model takes revenue away from us and therefore affects our livelihood," Abdelnour said.

After the hearing, Raynham Park owner George Carney told the News Service Raynham should be included under an extension, noting the track has downsized its workforce but still supports 218 workers and their families. The current simulcasting law expires July 31 so Beacon Hill has less than 90 days to deal with the issue.

The committee also heard Tuesday from a state senator from Somerville and representatives of three animal welfare groups, who said the 2008 ballot law banning dog racing should be fully implemented by prohibiting wagering in Massachusetts on dog races held in other states and broadcast at tracks here.

Proponents of the bill (S 107) asserted that dog races account of only 10 percent of simulcast races so banning wagering on simulcast dog races will not have a big impact. Sen. Patricia Jehlen (D-Somerville) said individuals who bet on dog races will likely shift to horse races.

Christine Dorchak, president of Grey2K, the national greyhound protection group that pushed the dog racing ban in 2008, told lawmakers: "This is not only something that will show that you respect the will of the voters. It's also something that will not be a hardship for those affected."

The Humane Society of the United States and the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals also support the bill, which affords one more extension on wagering on dogs but ends simulcasting on dog races on Jan. 1, 2013.

Dorchak said the ballot law banned wagering on dog racing "where any form of betting or wagering on the speed or ability of dogs occurs."

After Dorchak attempted to quiz lawmakers on greyhound cruelty issues, committee co-chairman Sen. Thomas Kennedy (D-

Brockton) told her “many of us” questioned the premise of cruelty behind the dog racing ban ballot question, noted the employment implications of the ballot law, and alleged the campaign had used “inflammatory” arguments. “We’re not here to rehash history,” Kennedy added.

When Dorchak asked if she could respond, Kennedy refused her. “We ask the questions here,” he said.

Committee co-chair Rep. Theodore Speliotis (D-Danvers) told the News Service after the hearing that the issues raised by the Grey2K-supported legislation were new to him as a chairman and he had not yet formed a position and planned to further review the bill.

“I’m going to be careful about how we proceed to find the right balance here,” Speliotis said.

The committee also heard conflicting testimony on a third simulcasting bill.

Sen. Anthony Petrucci (D-East Boston) is sponsoring legislation that empowers the State Racing Commission to allow simulcasting even if tracks with live racing don’t hold the minimum number of races required by law each season. The bill is designed to preserve the ability of Suffolk Downs, which is in Petrucci’s district, to continue wagering on simulcast races while enabling the track to reduce its live racing schedule from 100 days to 80 days.

Chip Tuttle, Suffolk’s chief operating officer, told lawmakers increased competition from lotteries and expanded gambling facilities over the past 20 years has eroded horse racing’s share of the domestic wagering market. The trend in turn has caused horsemen in New England to leave for states like Florida, Pennsylvania and New York.

“In horse racing right now, less is more,” Tuttle said. “All around the country, tracks are reducing racing days and, in many cases, raising purses, both out of necessity, due to lack of horses, and due to consumer demand.”

The number of thoroughbred foals produced in the United States over the last decade dropped 20 percent and the trend of fewer horses available to race “will continue and intensify in the coming years,” Tuttle said.

Suffolk anticipates that even with reduced racing days, total purses for the season will be greater than last year - \$8.25 million versus \$7.8 million – and said the New England Horsemen’s Benevolent and Protective Association, as part of its agreement with Suffolk, agreed not to oppose the legislation (S 124).

George Brown, representing the Massachusetts Thoroughbred Breeders Association, submitted testimony opposing the bill, saying the minimum live racing days clause is intended to maintain the thoroughbred breeding program.

“Allowing the state racing commission to decide how many live racing days are required to continue simulcasting will lead to the elimination of live racing completely, thereby killed the thoroughbred breeding industry,” Brown said in his testimony.

Brown said the expanded gambling bill that reached Gov. Deval Patrick’s desk last year, but failed to win final passage, incrementally increased required live racing days in a bid to expand the breeding program. Noting roughly 7,000 acres of open space are devoted to thoroughbred horse farms in Massachusetts, Brown said horse farm owners “depend on live racing at Suffolk Downs as our livelihood.”

Rep. Stephen DiNatale (D-Fitchburg), also in written testimony, expressed his opposition to the Petrucci bill, saying it is “not in the best interest of the future of the live horse racing industry in the Commonwealth.”