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Dogs and poker sometimes don't mix

Posted: January 11, 2012 - 12:00am | Updated: January 11, 2012 - 6:17am



By The Times-Union

These are unusual allies, an organization devoted to ending greyhound racing and the industry itself.

But a group aiming to shut down greyhound tracks has joined with the track owners on a piece of legislation that has wide support.

In fact, a bill passed in both the Florida House and Senate last year, but died in conference.

The bill would “decouple” greyhound racing from other forms of gambling.

Under current law, a certain number of greyhound performances must be held in order for a track to qualify for other forms of gambling.

Interference

What this means in practice is that owners do not have the right to shut down a track and convert to a poker room, for example, even if the poker room is more profitable than the greyhound track.

One group that would like the law to be changed is aligned with animal rights. If you can't shut down the tracks, they reason, they should at least be allowed to close by their own choice.

Grey2K USA is a nonprofit group that advocates for the end of greyhound racing. Greyhound racing exists in only seven states, but Florida is a national

leader.

And 13 of the 22 operational tracks in the nation are in Florida. Thus the focus here among animal rights groups.

A slow death?

Spokesmen who met with the Times-Union editorial board pulled no punches. They see this bill as allowing greyhound racing to die a natural death — the quicker, the better, in their view.

“The facilities have become poker rooms with dogs running around in circles with nobody watching,” said Christine Dorchak, president and general counsel of Grey2K USA.

This is especially true in South Florida where there is more competition for the gambling dollar.

According to information reported from the state of Florida, paid attendance and tax revenues from Florida greyhound tracks have plunged since 2006.

The amount gambled on live dog racing declined by 57 percent between 2002 and 2010.

In fact, since 1990 the amount of taxes collected for live greyhound racing declined by more than 96 percent — from more than \$75 million in 1990 to less than \$2.7 million in 2010.

From 2006-07 to 2010-11:

- Tax revenues dropped from \$7 million to less than \$2 million.

- Paid attendance dropped from 1.7 million to about 600,000.

Howard Korman, head of the Jacksonville Kennel Club, said in an interview that he does not oppose the bill.

Even if it passes, he said that he plans to continue dog racing in the local circuit of tracks in Orange Park and Bayard.

It's not just a Jacksonville operation; it has gone international.

Dog racing here is simulcast to about 100 sites in the U.S., Europe and Mexico, he said.

Overstepping government

In any case, this is not an expansion of gambling; it's continuing what is already taking place.

And if a declining part of the business needs to shut down, government should not stand in the way.

To force a track to remain open when it is no longer profitable makes no sense. It's a perfect example of government interference.

Government should not be telling a business how to operate other than for health, safety and other regulations that affect the general public.

Let the operators continue with their other gambling operations.

Decouple the greyhound tracks from inefficient rules and take advantage of this unusual alliance between the track owners and their opponents.