

Negotiations would immediately end dog racing in Dubuque

By Ben Jacobson and Erin Murphy TH staff writers | Posted: Wednesday, January 29, 2014 7:44 pm

Officials representing two Iowa casinos and greyhound breeders are negotiating an agreement that could end greyhound racing before this season starts.

In Dubuque, that move would impact more local employees than previously reported.

Mystique Casino President and CEO Jesus Aviles confirmed today that he is in talks with Iowa Greyhound Association leaders to negotiate a buyout with the industry. If both sides come to terms, Aviles and Iowa Senate President Pam Jochum, of Dubuque, said they believe state legislators will allow Mystique and Harrah's in Council Bluffs — each home to one of the state's two greyhound tracks — to get entirely out of dog racing.

“Most (elected officials) feel if we can negotiate some kind of out with the industry, it would be easier for them to legislate,” Aviles said, adding a settlement effectively would eliminate any opposition. “(Negotiations) are going slower than we would want them to go. Our intention was not to race this season. But at least they're communicating.”

Harrah's has lobbied for years against legislation forcing both casinos to host greyhound racing. The Dubuque Racing Association, Mystique's nonprofit license holder, recently joined the fight after the expiration of a contractual gag order from Iowa Greyhound Association.

Both casinos argue that interest in greyhound racing is waning, and attendance and betting numbers are down as a result. Combined betting at both greyhound parks dropped from \$186 million in 1986 to \$5.9 million in 2012, according to the Associated Press.

Additionally, racing tracks now have to cannibalize the very casinos they spawned in order to remain viable, according to casino officials. The Dubuque Racing Association spent about \$4.5 million last year to subsidize greyhound racing at Mystique, officials have said.

The Iowa Legislature must approve an end to the racing mandate, and Dubuque-area state lawmakers Jochum and Pat Murphy said the onus is on the casinos and greyhound racers to negotiate a settlement that appeases both sides. Jochum said that will likely include the casinos paying a buyout to the Iowa Greyhound Association, which then will use that money to assist greyhound farmers impacted.

“The point of it is so there's a soft landing for dog owners and the kennels,” Jochum said.

Jochum said state lawmakers will not be involved in those negotiations.

“That's something they're negotiating,” Jochum said. “The two tracks have to figure out how much

money they're willing to spend. That's not our baby."

If the sides strike an agreement, Jochum believes the Iowa Legislature will approve ending the racing requirement, she said.

Previous reports said ending greyhound racing would impact only a dozen union parimutuel employees at Mystique. Those employees will be transferred to other positions within the casino or given severance packages.

However, the park also employs dozens more temporary employees each the racing season.

"Sometimes you have (employees) coming in (each year). Sometimes you don't," Aviles said. "This is just a part-time job, just like if they decided to do their summer job at a beach club or at McDonald's or somewhere else."

Corey Morris, the park's adoption coordinator since 2003, said that, when you count kennel security, maintenance, and dog "lead-outs," employment counts swell to 40 or 50.

Morris loves her work so much, she brought it home with her, she said. Two retired racing dogs can be found lounging around Morris' home.

"They are the sweetest dogs," she said. "They're really even-tempered ... They're really good with kids. My three sons were raised around them. I couldn't find a better pet."

Morris said she believes greyhound racing could become more viable if it were better promoted. Taking it away effectively would eliminate Dubuque's uniqueness in an increasingly crowded gambling market.

"Everybody I've talked to here in town thinks this is one of the unique things we have here, and we should really promote it," she said. "We stand apart from the other casinos because of the greyhound racing. It sets us apart."

Aviles said protections or severance packages for seasonal employees weren't considered. But he said the parimutuel employees, who handle bets and payouts, are content with the arrangement.

"This last year, their contract came up, and we signed their contract for another three years," Aviles said. "I told them (then), 'Listen, coming next year, when we're available, this is what we're going to do, and this will affect your jobs.' ... Many people have thanked me for being considerate in this reorganization, and I have thanked them for being understanding because this is a life-changing situation."