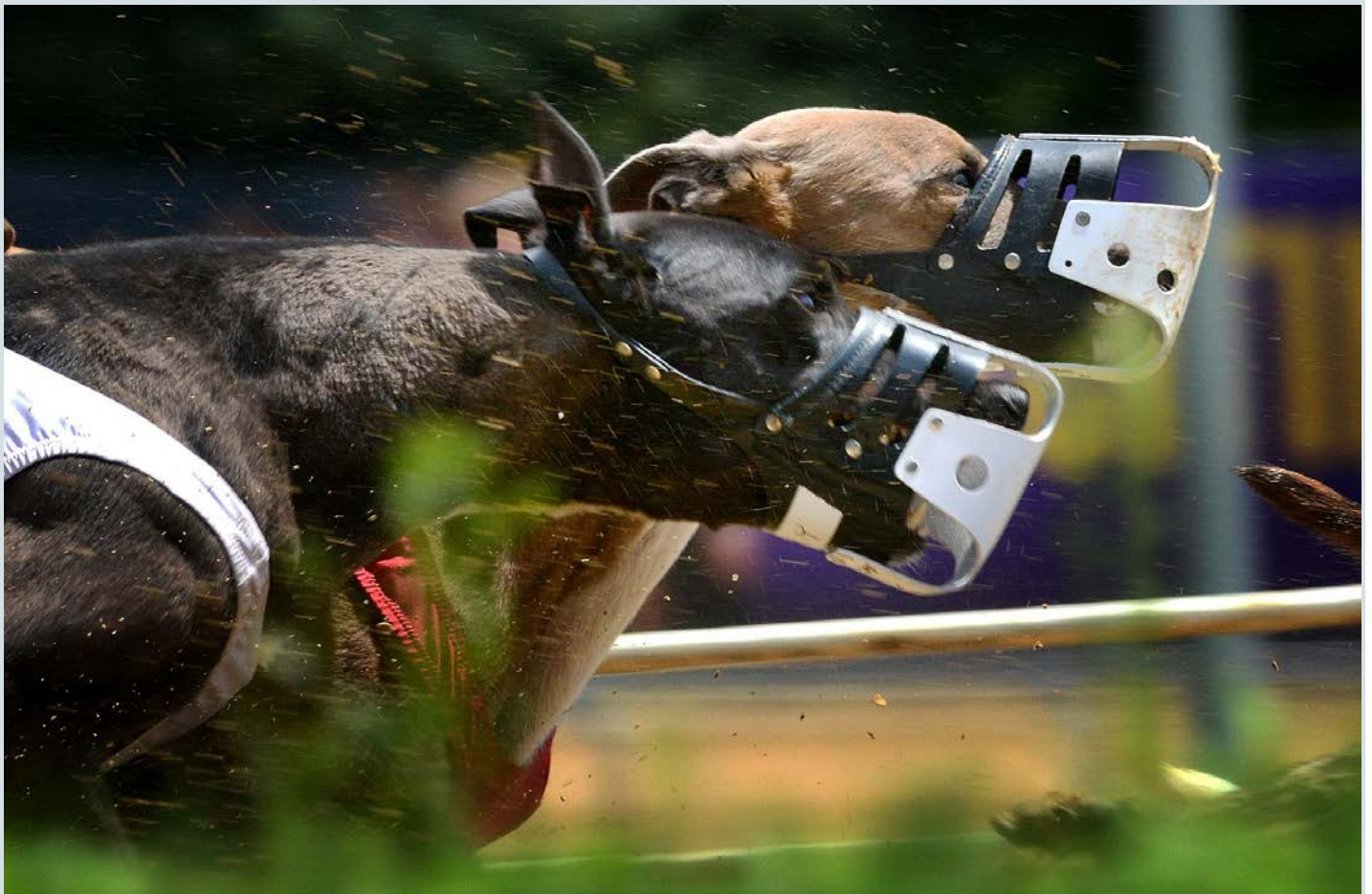


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Group seeks legislation to end WV greyhound racing

by Phil Kabler, Statehouse Reporter



BONNIE JO MOUNT | The Washington Post

Greyhound racing in Nitro and at Wheeling Island Racetrack (shown here) could come to an end if legislation backed by the anti-greyhound racing group Grey2K USA is approved.

It was no coincidence that the national board of directors of anti-greyhound racing organization Grey2K USA selected Charleston for its annual meeting.

“This is a top state for us, absolutely,” President Christine Dorchak said Monday, as the board closed out a three-day retreat in Charleston’s East End.

Board members — some who came from as far away as New Mexico — spent the weekend at the Brass Pineapple bed and breakfast, a half-block from the state Capitol — where they hope legislation will be passed during the 2016 session to eliminate greyhound racing at racetrack casinos in Nitro and Wheeling.

“We’re very hopeful this session,” Dorchak said. “We think the time has come in West Virginia.”

While Grey2K USA is a humane association focused on the welfare of greyhounds, Dorchak said the board members recognize that legislation to end greyhound racing in West Virginia will primarily be driven by financial concerns.

During the 2015 regular session, time ran out on negotiations on legislation introduced in the Senate to eliminate the provision in state law that requires the two racetrack casinos to offer greyhound racing, while providing a multi-million dollar buyout to current greyhound owners and breeders.

On Monday, Sen. Chris Walters, R-Putnam, told the board members that an agreed-to bill will be ready on the first day of the 2016 session.

“It took a long time to get all the buyout figures negotiated,” said Walters, who said the current proposal is a \$19 million buyout that will be available only to state residents. “We will have that bill ready.”

Afterward, Walters said the idea of buying out greyhound owners and breeders isn’t popular with legislators, but said the owners and breeders likely would go to court to block any “decoupling” legislation that does not provide them with compensation.

“If we don’t do the buyout, there’s supposed to be litigation that would hold up the money going to general revenue for several years,” he said.

Under the legislation, once the buyout is complete, revenues that have gone to subsidize greyhound racing will go into the state’s general revenue fund, to be appropriated by the Legislature.

Earlier this year, a study commissioned by the state Legislature found that in 2012, about \$29 million of the \$31 million of state greyhound racing revenues came from subsidies from casino gaming profits.

Dorchak suggested that if a company came to the Legislature seeking \$29 million a year in state subsidies to support a money-losing business operation, that proposal would be quickly rejected.

“If the free market prevailed, it [greyhound racing] wouldn’t be here,” she said.

Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA, noted Monday that greyhound racing is on the decline nationally, with 26 tracks closed since the organization was founded in 2001, with two additional tracks set to shut down in January.

That will leave just 19 greyhound tracks operating in six states, he said, adding that wagering on greyhound races has plunged from \$3.5 billion in 1991 to \$600 million last year.

“The bottom has fallen out of this industry,” Theil said. “Every day, the tracks are losing money.”

Theil said every greyhound track in the country relies on state subsidies of various kinds to remain open.

Theil said he believes grassroots support is growing in West Virginia to end greyhound racing, both from a humane and a financial perspective.

“There are so many people in the state who are working on this,” he said. “We’re eager to play whatever supporting role we can.”

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