

STATE HOUSE NEWS: Anti-casino group gets help from frustrated dog racing opponents

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The group behind the 2008 ballot law banning greyhound racing in Massachusetts is throwing its support and signature-collecting expertise behind another ballot proposal, an initiative petition prohibiting the state from issuing licenses under its 2011 casino law.

Attorney General Martha Coakley in September declined to certify as ballot eligible the proposal to prohibit casinos, but the question's supporters got an injunction from the Supreme Judicial Court and papers from Secretary of State William Galvin's office to begin collecting signatures for the 2014 ballot.

Explaining the attorney general's decision against certifying the petition because contract rights are considered property and may not be "taken" by an initiative petition, State Solicitor Peter Sacks wrote in September, "The applicants do have a reasonable expectation, and indeed an implied contractual right, that the application process itself will play out." Sacks said 11 applicants for casino and slots licenses had paid \$4.4 million in application fees and \$4.2 million in additional charges.

Repeal the Casino Deal campaign director Brian Ashmankas said his group is hoping for a favorable ruling on ballot eligibility in the spring from the Supreme Judicial Court.

While casino supporters envision new jobs, entertainment options and revenues for the state, casino opponents fear an approaching wave of negative fiscal and social consequences if Massachusetts continues on its casino licensing path.

Ashmankas welcomed help from GREY 2K, saying anti-casino volunteers are energized but need assistance gathering the 68,911 signatures that must be submitted to local officials by Nov. 20. "We're plugging along," Ashmankas said. "It's a citizen's petition. I won't tell you it's all roses and sunshine."

Grey2KUSA Executive Director Carey Theil said Thursday that the 2008 ballot law banned dog racing or racing meetings where "any form of betting or wagering on the speed or ability of dogs occurs," and said lawmakers reauthorized greyhound simulcast wagering in the 2011 casino law.

"When rounding up votes for the casino bill, they went out and made a backroom deal to extend greyhound simulcasting," he told the News Service. "When they did that they went against the will of the voters."

Theil said voters who overwhelmingly approved the dog racing ban in 2008 did not do so expecting wagering to continue at racetracks on "the same cruel dog races that are happening elsewhere."

The Massachusetts Gaming Commission is in the midst of an extensive application and vetting process to determine which groups will receive casino licenses in three regions of the state and the state's sole slot parlor license.

Wonderland Greyhound Park closed after the law passed, while Raynham Park stopped greyhound racing, but continued simulcasting and is seeking the lone slots license. Raynham is competing with gaming developers seeking to put a slots parlor at the Plainridge Racecourse harness horse track. Suffolk Downs, the other horse racing track, is vying for a casino license.

On Beacon Hill, legislative leaders and the Patrick administration are watching the licensing process play out and readying plans to spend state revenues they expect to receive from casinos.

Theil said he had sent an alert to his campaign's 2008 supporters urging them to help gather signatures for the anti-casino proposal and was reaching out to other humane organizations to see if they would help.

The 2008 campaign against dog racing featured 5,000 active volunteers. "They are probably the best folks in the state at this," he said. "Whether or not they're going to take time out of their lives to fight for this is a decision they're going to have to make."