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Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track feels dwindling interest in dog racing

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After years of fighting dog track owners for mistreating greyhounds, animal right activists have found an unlikely ally to end or significantly reduce the century-old sport.

Dog track owners.

Complaining that they are being forced to spend millions of dollars a year to subsidize a pastime that the public has all but forgot, Bonita Springs dog track owners and other Florida tracks are lobbying for a state law that would allow them to reduce their number of state-mandated races.

The Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track, which kicks off its racing season today, is required to run 3,264 races a year.

Owner Izzy Havenick would like to reduce that number by half for largely economic reasons. His track loses \$3 million a year on dog races. The track's poker room, which opened in 1996, has been keeping the 54-year-old business alive.

Slot machines could also bring revenue. A referendum on Tuesday's Lee County ballot would allow slot machines at the Bonita dog track, but even if the referendum is passed there's no certainly slots would be installed at the dog track. Attorney General Pam Bondi ruled in January that local referendums aren't legitimate

and that gambling in the state can only expand through a change in state law or a constitutional amendment.

“For them to find common ground with us has been a little like Alice in Wonderland,” said Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA, a nonprofit group focused on ending greyhound racing.

“Having said that, I think everyone agrees that dog racing in Florida is being artificially propped up by the live racing mandate, which has effectively become a state subsidy for greyhound breeders.”

The live racing mandate was established in 1996 when the state authorized card rooms at greyhound tracks. To continue their card rooms, the tracks are required to conduct at least 90 percent of the performances they conducted in 1996 when they applied for their initial card room license.

The Bonita dog track had one of its successful years in 1996, which is why the track has the highest number of state-mandated races among Florida’s 13 tracks.

“I think everybody would like to see the dogs not race especially if nobody is watching the races and it is damaging to animals,” said Sanibel resident Mark Andrews, director of Lee Says No to Predatory Gambling. “But the real issue here is they want their slot machines because of the money. These slot machines are designed to addict and harm.”

Despite the oversaturation of local races, few people attend and wager on races in Bonita. Havenick estimates about 200 people will attend the daily races in Bonita. He believes people have turned away because of an increase in gaming opportunities with the lottery, Seminole casinos and Internet gaming.

“Going to a dog track and studying the dogs involves effort as opposed to sitting at home and betting on the Internet,” Havenick said.

Betting at the Bonita track dropped from \$73.6 million in 1990 to \$9 million last year. A similar decline has happened statewide as state taxes on live greyhound racing dropped from \$75 million in 1990 to \$2.7 million last year.

Havenick agreed that it's odd that he and Grey2K are fighting for the same change in the law.

"While we don't have the same endgame, we both realize together that dog racing is a dying sport," Havenick said. "Animal activists would like to see the sport go away. We think that with a little help it could work again."

Havenick's reversal is considered a betrayal to greyhound owners, who invested thousands into the sport. They say dog racing was used as justification for Florida to expand into other forms of gambling such as poker.

"I think dog people are in favor of reducing races, but the problem is how many are you going to reduce?" said Estero's John Weber, who owns 20 greyhounds that race in Bonita. "We've got to make a living. I've got \$30,000 tied up with these dogs. I bought these dogs because the law said I can race them. Who's going to recoup my \$30,000 if they take away racing?"

Florida is one of the few remaining states to race dogs. Nationwide, there are 22 greyhound tracks in seven states. That's down from 49 tracks in 15 states a decade ago, according to Grey2K. Some tracks have gone out of business; others were shut down through legislation. Massachusetts and New Hampshire voters outlawed dog racing in 2008 and 2010, respectively.

The Florida Legislature has come close to changing the live racing mandate and giving track owners the ability to set their own number of races. Two years ago, a decoupling bill passed the Florida House and Senate only to die in the last day of the session as two chambers couldn't agree on minor differences. Last year, a legislative committee chair declined to bring the matter to a vote even though there was support in the House and Senate.

Florida Greyhound Association, which represents dog owners, said the passage of such a bill would mean 3,000 lost jobs and \$50 million in lost economic impact and put 8,000 dogs at risk.

"Those 8,000 dogs will race for a year or two often at multiple tracks and then be replaced with 8,000 new dogs," Theil said.

"There are adoption groups throughout the state that find homes for

dogs, but I think everyone can acknowledge that not every dog finds a home. How many dogs fall through the cracks? We don't know because the state doesn't keep records on it.”
