
Statehouse Beat: Greyhound subsidy money could be tempting

By Phil Kabler

West Virginia's greyhound racing industry could well be under siege in the 2015 regular session of the Legislature.

There's the study that's been commissioned by the Lottery Commission at the behest of the two current Finance Committee chairmen (Sen. Roman Prezioso, D-Marion, Delegate Brent Boggs, D-Braxton) to determine if it would be in the state's best interest to eliminate subsidies for greyhound owners and breeders (totaling \$22.9 million in fiscal 2013, dropping to about \$20 million this year with legislation passed in March cutting greyhound and thoroughbred subsidies by 10 percent).

With the contract for that study still winding its way through the state purchasing process as of Friday, it's unlikely that report could be completed by a requested Dec. 31 deadline.

While commissioned by Democratic chairmen, the report will be presented to a Republican-controlled Legislature. However, it's probably worth noting that only nine of the 57 Republicans in the Legislature in March voted against the racing subsidy "haircut" bill, and eight of the nine were from the Charles Town/Hollywood racetrack region.

Given that the new Republican-controlled Legislature is not likely to propose tax increases to balance the state budget, that \$20 million will look awfully tempting.

Meanwhile, Grey2K USA, a national organization committed to outlawing greyhound racing nationwide for humane issues, has hired Rob Casto as their lobbyist this session.

That's a significant hire, since before starting his government relations/lobbying group, Casto served more than 17 years as a House staffer, rising to assistant to the speaker.

Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K, said the organization is focusing on West Virginia, seeing a real opportunity between the financial pressures state government is facing, and an ongoing decline in greyhound racing attendance/wagering, to make a push to end greyhound racing in the state.

He said it's telling that Sam Burdette, president of the state Greyhound Owners and Breeders Association, has already made overtures for a buyout plan if the Legislature would pass a decoupling bill – eliminating the requirement that the management of Mardi Gras and Wheeling Downs operate greyhound racing as a condition of maintaining their casino licenses.

However, the industry is not likely to go down without a fight, likely with outside money and interests pushing for continuing the state subsidies and racing – particularly from Florida, home of 13 of the nation's 21 remaining greyhound tracks, and where the industry fought to defeat a decoupling bill in the Florida Legislature this year.

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Meanwhile, Larry Carraher of the state Racing Commission, noted that the commission received an

economic impact study on greyhound and thoroughbred racing earlier this year, raising the question, “Is our Legislature aware that this study was just conducted and released?”

The study by the WVU Research Corp., and underwritten by thoroughbred and greyhound industry associations, concludes that in 2012, horse and dog racing had a direct economic impact of \$146 million, with greyhound racing accounting for about 10 percent of that total.

(Not to editorialize, but if there were a factory in the state that received \$87.6 million of state subsidies (the total racing subsidies for 2012) and had an economic impact of \$146 million, I suspect taxpayers would be outraged.)

Interestingly, the study found that the racing industry paid \$2.2 million in state taxes in 2012.

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Finally, West Virginia Public Broadcasting has covered the Legislature in one form or another since the 1970s, but has always lacked one crucial asset: the ability to broadcast live from the Capitol.

Previously, the only way to have live TV broadcasts was to lease a satellite uplink truck, which for an agency that operates on a budget that is half what it was in 1996 (adjusted for inflation), it can quickly become a budget-buster. (That was one reason why WVPB ended its live coverage of the last night of the session after 2008.)

Efforts over the years to set up more affordable microwave links between the Capitol and Public Broadcasting’s studios on 600 Capitol St. downtown proved unworkable.

However, technology has finally caught up, and executive director Scott Finn said WVPB studios are now linked fiber-optically to the Capitol.

The connection will cost \$1,100 a month – a comparative bargain considering that the satellite truck rental to broadcast Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin’s 2014 State of the State address alone cost WVPB \$2,400.

Besides making it much easier to broadcast news conferences live in the event of a future water crisis, blizzard or derecho, Finn said it also opens up the possibility of live, CSPAN-style coverage of floor sessions on the WVPBS 2 digital channel (channel 5 on Suddenlink).

Frankly, very little of what happens on the House or Senate floors would make for riveting television – there’s a reason some of us get paid to watch the Legislature 10 hours a day, so you don’t have to – but it could be another step toward more transparency in government.

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