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End Subsidies For Dog Racing

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By THE INTELLIGENCER , The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register

Wheeling Island Hotel-Casino-Racetrack is going to the dogs in part because it is forced by state law to go to the dogs, literally. It is time for West Virginia legislators to reconsider whether that is appropriate.

Breeders of racing greyhounds enjoy a highly unusual subsidy in the Mountain State. Dozens of them receive payments, totaling between \$5 million and \$6 million annually, out of the Greyhound Development Fund. That is in addition to money they receive when their dogs win races at Wheeling Island or the state's other greyhound track at Cross Lanes.

The greyhound program and another for horse racing are funded by video machine and table gambling at the two dog and two horse racing tracks. A percentage of what is wagered in gambling with no relation whatsoever to racing goes into the two funds.

Competition from Ohio and Pennsylvania casinos has made life more difficult for the Wheeling Island facility and for Mountaineer Casino, Racetrack and Resort at Chester. It has forced Wheeling Island casino President and General Manager Jim Simms to rethink his business. One change he would like to make is to stage fewer dog races. Racing "is a declining industry," he told our reporter.

To cut costs, Simms asked the state Racing Commission for permission to reduce the number of dog races held at his facility. Last year, 115 races a week were held; this year, Simms wants to go down to 101.

Simms thought the commission might go along with him. But after hearing from racing dog owners angry about the plan, it backed away, allowing a cut only to 107 races a week.

That is simply irrational.

Casino gambling pumps hundreds of millions of dollars a year into local and state governments. Simms now admits, in effect, that he needs to cut costs to stay in business. Yet the racing commission, to please a few dog breeders, is telling him, "No dice."

We know of no other type of business that receives subsidies like those awarded to the dog and horse racing industries. For years, breeders have enjoyed both state assurance their business will continue and subsidies from the breeders fund.

Legislators never should have gone along with the scheme to begin with. In part because it is simply wrong and also because it threatens revenue from the casino industry, they should alter the law.

Racetracks should be permitted to hold as many or as few races as they judge prudent - or none at all. The breeders funds should be phased out, with money that now flows into them going instead to local and state governments. That could replace some of the revenue lost because of competition from Ohio and Pennsylvania. Bills to make that happen should be prepared immediately and acted upon no later than next month.



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