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Bill aimed at ending dog racing advances in Senate

Casinos could drop it by paying a 're-licensing fee.'

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A renewed \$70 million battle to allow casinos to end greyhound racing moved ahead Wednesday in the Iowa Senate despite objections that the bill would be a job killer.

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"I'm going to summarize this to say in 40 years I've never seen the General Assembly set out to kill 1,000 jobs," said Don Avenson, a Democrat and former legislator who now works as a lobbyist for the Iowa Greyhound Association. "That's what this bill does. And this was supposed to be a session to create jobs."

Senate Study Bill 1064 would allow Horseshoe Council Bluffs and Mystique Casino in Dubuque to pay the state treasury a combined \$10 million "re-licensing fee" in each of the next seven years. Both are now required to offer greyhound racing in order to offer casino gambling. They would be freed of the dog racing obligation in exchange for the payments.

This is the third straight year that casino operators have lobbied to get out of a state requirement that's become increasingly expensive for the casinos as consumer interest in dog racing dwindles.

Jim Carney, a lobbyist for Caesars Entertainment, which runs the Horseshoe casino, cited Association of Racing Commissioners International data showing that wagering on live greyhound racing in Iowa dropped from \$120.6 million in 1991 to \$6.22 million last year. He also contended that the number of jobs created by the industry had been greatly inflated, although Avenson strongly disagreed.

The nearly 95 percent decrease in money bet on greyhound racing is part of a national trend. Carney distributed information showing that the number of U.S. dog racing tracks had fallen by half from

2002 to 2010, leaving just 23. Seven states, including Iowa, now have dog racing, and one of those, Arizona, is phasing it out, he noted.

“Dog racing is matter of fact dead,” Carney said during a Senate State Government subcommittee meeting. “The only thing sustaining it here is this pool that we have to pay, of which over 40 percent is going to out-of-state dog owners.”

The proposal was approved by the three-person subcommittee. Sen. Rick Bertrand, R-Sioux City, said he agreed that dog racing had lost its popularity, but he added that the \$10 million payment feels “like a shakedown, almost.” He ultimately supported the bill after inquiring how the money would be used. The money will go into the state’s general fund. Bertrand said he would be more comfortable if he could be assured it would be used to pay for state services that don’t require annual appropriations.

Sen. Wally Horn, D-Cedar Rapids, also supported the bill, saying he’s trying to do “what’s fair and right.”

Sen. Jack Hatch, D-Des Moines, did not attend the meeting but previously said he would not support the measure unless the \$10 million was an indefinite payment.

The bill now heads to the full committee.
