

Senate Gaming Committee hears request for 'decoupling'

By Matthew Beaton / The News Herald

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TALLAHASSEE — Animal activists and greyhound tracks have common ground on dog racing.

The state Senate Gaming Committee heard testimony Monday from a nonprofit animal advocacy group, saying both sides support "decoupling" live races and card room licenses. Under state law, dog tracks must run 90 percent of the live races they did the year they received the card room license.

"While interest has plummeted in this particular activity, the number of races has remained the same," said Carey Theil, executive director of GREY2K USA.

Theil said overall pari-mutuel wagering on live races is dying, but greyhounds will continue to be run in higher-than-demanded numbers if the law is not amended.

Theil said poker rooms are the primary moneymaker, but they also have dogs "running around in a circle" so poker will remain. For that reason, the greyhound advocates and dog tracks are singing the same tune on decoupling.

"It is a little bit like 'Alice in Wonderland' to have the tracks on our side on that issue," he said.

Theil said his organization supports greyhound decoupling because fewer races would be run and fewer dogs injured.

In the meeting, Theil said breeders are the only group against decoupling because the required racing days acts as a subsidy for the breeders.

Theil said the idea has bipartisan, widespread support and the measure passed the House and Senate two years ago, but it missed becoming law because the two chambers couldn't agree on "relatively minor differences."

The issue likely will be addressed in the 2014 session, as both Senate and House leaders have indicated comprehensive legislation will not be undertaken this year.

Ebro response

Stockton Hess, president and general manager of the Ebro track, can be counted among the dog track owners in favor of decoupling.

"We support it," Hess said. "We support anything that will give us the freedom in business to make the best decisions."

If decoupling became a reality, every greyhound track in the state would have the option to reduce the number of live-race days and could operate the business in the most lucrative way possible.

Hess said Ebro must run 167 performances annually; a performance is any combination of eight races and usually takes a day to complete. He said on Saturdays the track runs two performances and runs about 185 performances annually.

By comparison, the Daytona Beach Kennel Club must run 440 performances annually,

and the Jefferson County Kennel Club in Monticello must run 225 performances annually, Hess said.

"It's a different number all over the state. It's just totally ridiculous," he said.

Hess agreed some tracks may be running the races only to operate their pokers rooms, but for him that's not the case.

"We have good interest in racing here. We have a good racing crowd," he said.

Hess said they wouldn't "change a thing" if decoupling were passed, but said it give them options in the future. He said it's hard to predict if they would need to run fewer performances in the future.

He said he has no problem with a state law requiring greyhounds' injuries be reported to the state. He said the track keeps a record of all the injuries that take place.

"If there is a problem with the race track surface creating injuries, then we want to fix it," he said.

Theil brought up the issue in the meeting. He told the committee that in a six-week period in 2011, 28 greyhounds at Ebro suffered "substantial injuries" and 10 were euthanized. He said his organization supports the mandatory reporting of injuries.