

Our opinion: Let sleeping greyhounds lie

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The question really isn't whether to end parimutuel greyhound racing in Iowa, but when to end it.

Dog racing in Iowa has become a state-subsidized pastime, and it is probably just a matter of time before the state decides it has had enough. That time should be sooner than later.

A bill approved by a Senate subcommittee last week would accept Mystique's proposal to pay state government

\$21 million over seven years to get out from under the burden of hosting dog races in Dubuque. When an enterprise is offering up that kind of money to stop doing something, you know it is a challenged industry.

The greyhound racing financial picture doesn't look much like it did when the dog track, then known at Dubuque Greyhound Park, opened in 1985. Then, dog racing was hailed as a boon to the local economy. And it was. Going to the track was a social event -- the place to see and be seen -- in the early years. (Remember "Super Six" fever?)

Voters agreed to a city bond issue to build the track and bring live racing to Dubuque as a way to promote tourism, create jobs and provide a fresh entertainment venue in a economically challenged community. The track did all that -- and more. The track's success provided impetus for more -- and more ambitious -- endeavors. Meanwhile, the state started to allow the tracks to expand into casino gambling.

More than two decades later, the picture is different: The casino is the dog; the track is the tail. Parimutuel wagering has declined from a record-high of about \$67 million in 1989 to just \$1.7 million in 2009. Iowa is one of only seven states that offers live greyhound racing. A decade ago there were 50 tracks in the U.S.; now there are 22.

Some lawmakers say it would be crazy to kill an industry at a time when the state is trying desperately to create jobs. But what is the value of those jobs when the entire industry is built on subsidy?

This isn't a situation where Iowa's tracks suffered one bad year. Statewide revenue from dog racing fell from \$120.6 million in 1991 to \$6.2 million. It's not as if the tracks aren't trying hard enough. It has been a long and steady decline.

The best thing the state can do is to let the tracks buy their way out of their state licensing agreements and move forward. The deal should include fair compensation for kennel owners and breeders and a plan to promote placement of the dogs in adoptive homes. Then let the greyhounds retire.

Dubuque should be proud of its role in greyhound racing and appreciative of what it meant for this

community during some dark economic days. But it's time to move on. Let the owners settle up with the state and allow the tracks to close.

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