

Posted: 6:03 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2015

TEXAS RACETRACKS

Curtain to close on dog racing in Texas

Gulf Greyhound Park in La Marque saw track wagering plummet.

ByTim Eaton teaton@statesman.com

Gulf Greyhound Park in La Marque will be closing, ending dog racing in Texas, officials confirmed Wednesday.

The dog track, which opened in 1992 near Houston and Galveston to great fanfare, has been struggling along with horse tracks across the state. Wagering is down 85 percent since its first full year in 1992, according to figures from the Texas Racing Commission.

The track will cease live racing effective Jan. 1, Gulf Greyhound Park General Manager Sally Briggs said in a statement provided first to the American-Statesman.

“We are unable to successfully compete with racetracks in surrounding states who offer expanded gambling opportunities,” she said, adding that the Texas Lottery, Internet gambling and the proliferation of illegal slot machine-like “8-liners” also have led to the track’s demise.

Further, she blamed “the continually rising cost of regulation in the face of a declining and much smaller industry.”

Nick James, executive director of the Texas Greyhound Association, said track officials tried without success to reduce the fees they pay to the commission.

“Their prudent monetary decision is to close,” James said.

Between 250 and 300 jobs at the track likely will be lost, plus 11 nearby kennels will suffer due to the closing, James said.

“It’s a big impact on the kennel owners, too,” he said. “It’s huge deal, and it’s going to be felt across the country.”

Briggs said that the dogs housed at the track will be sent to other states or go to adoption programs.

It’s unclear if Greyhound Racing Park still will offer simulcast betting, like the two other greyhound tracks in Texas that have already ended live racing.

The news came a day after the racing commission voted to defy state Senate leaders to keep in place a rule to allow historical racing.

Racing industry representatives say the new form of gambling — which allows betting on already-run races with identifying markers stripped from horses — could revive the state’s seven racetracks.

State Republican leaders call the move an illegal expansion of gambling.

The greyhound track’s tax payments likewise have plummeted.

In 1993, the track paid the state \$7.7 million in pari-mutuel tax, not counting real estate, admission, sales, liquor and other taxes. By 2004, the pari-mutuel tax fell to \$436,000. Last year, the state collected \$254,000 in pari-mutuel tax from Greyhound Racing Park, according to racing commission figures.

Before the track opened, several groups jockeyed for ownership, but Paul Bryant Jr. — the son of late University of Alabama football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant — ultimately led the winning bid to own the track.

At the time, dog racing was witnessing two decades of growth, and investors had estimated that the Galveston County track would generate handles — the amount bet on races — as high as \$300 million annually.

Last year, the total handle amounted to \$40.2 million, most of which came from live racing, off 57 percent from a decade earlier.

Christine Dorchak, president of the GREY2K USA animal advocacy group, called the news of the closing “a victory for everyone in the state who cares about dogs.” The group objects to the confinement and treatment of the race dogs, some of which have suffered serious injuries.

GULF BETTING

Total wagering at Gulf Greyhound 1993: >268.4 million

2000: >138.2 million

2004: >91.9 million

2010: >55.5 million

2014: >40.2 million

SOURCE: TEXAS RACING

COMMISSION