

Casino bill could save state \$21 million

Pam Kendall Feb 25, 2016

The Legislature is working on a bill that would drop the requirement to have greyhound racing in order for a casino to operate in the state of West Virginia. We think it's a good idea for one big reason: It will save the state up to \$21 million in greyhound racing subsidies.

That's right. The state pays greyhound owners and breeders more than \$21 million in Lottery funds every year. That is 95 percent of the state greyhound industry's revenues every year.

What industry in this country gets government subsidies amounting to 95 percent of its income? In addition, fewer and fewer people are attending greyhound races in West Virginia. But, by law, the casinos can't operate without the racing.

This bill would "decouple" racing from the casinos.

The measure, which went to the Senate floor this week, will also stop state payments of \$10 million to casinos to upgrade gaming areas.

A similar bill last year would have offered a \$36 million buyout to the greyhound owners and breeders, but because of the urgency of the budget crisis this year, there would be no buyout.

The \$21 million and the \$10 million saved would go to the state's general revenue fund. That would go a long way toward stemming the flow of red ink.

This year's bill also has a sweetener for casino owners in that it would raise from 5 percent to 20 percent the number of registered voters needed to petition for a recall of a casino's license.

This is not just a West Virginia problem. Greyhound racing is struggling in other parts of the country. CBS News did a story this month on the state of Florida, which is seeing a similar decline in the sport.

One Florida racetrack owner said the crowds are almost nonexistent.

"To have 50 people come to a business that seats thousands, it's like going to a Dolphins game in December. It's an empty building," he said.

Ouch.

The Florida legislature is considering its own decoupling bill now.

We hope the West Virginia Legislature passes a decoupling bill because this state has been propping up a dying industry for too long. This is corporate welfare of the worst kind.

This bill also would plug a big hole in our state budget at a time when saving every dollar counts.

And not only will West Virginia benefit from the end of greyhound racing, so will the dogs that no longer have to participate in a sport that many call inhumane and cruel.