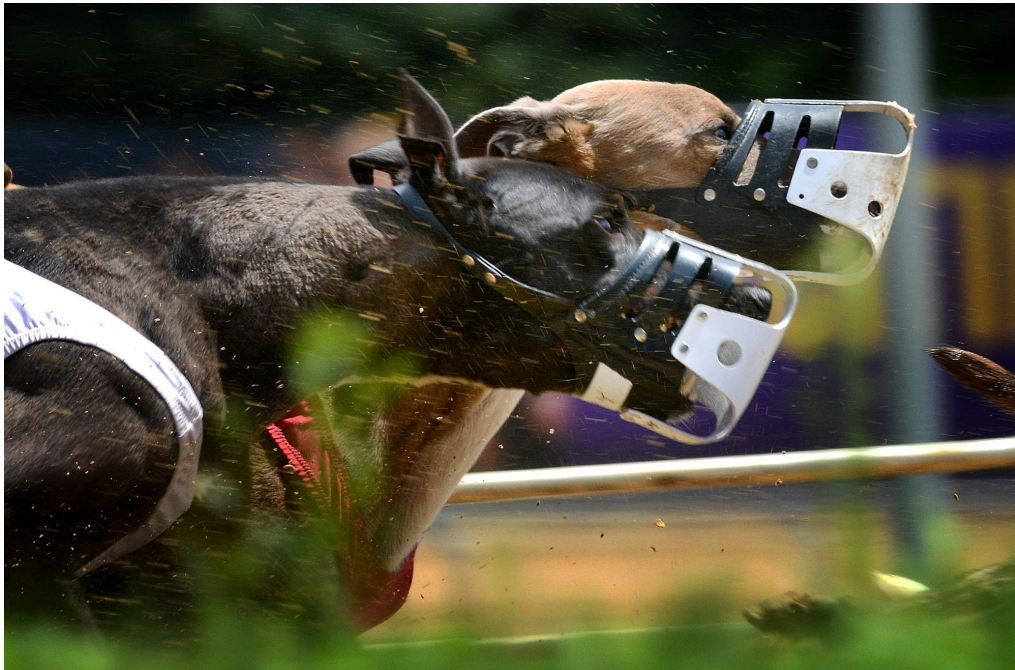


## Senate passes bill pulling state funds from greyhound racing

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BONNIE JO MOUNT | Washington Post

Greyhound racing in West Virginia moved closer to its final finish line, with passage Tuesday in the Senate of a bill to eliminate state subsidies for the races as of July 1.

The bill (SB 641), which passed the Senate 29-5, would eliminate state subsidies for greyhound purse and breeder's

funds — funds that a Spectrum Racing Group study released in 2015 concluded accounts for more than 95 percent of total greyhound racing revenues.

According to the state Racing Commission, elimination of the subsidies would free up about \$11.3 million to appropriate into the cash-strapped 2016-17 state budget. The bill also frees up another \$10 million by eliminating the Racetrack Modernization Fund, a matching fund that state racetrack casinos have been able to use to upgrade their gaming areas.

“I'm disappointed the bill was not made fair to the families in the greyhound business,” Sam Burdette, with the state Greyhound Owners and Breeders Association, said afterward.

Last year, Burdette had advocated a bill that died at the end of the session to provide a three-year buyout for greyhound owners and breeders.

He said Tuesday that many of those owners and breeders had been lured into the industry with the promise in state law that state video lottery profits would bolster racing purses.

Sen. Ryan Ferns, R-Ohio, made a similar argument on the Senate floor, citing the greyhound owners and breeders who had turned out at the Capitol Tuesday to protest the bill.

“The people here today certainly feel that the state of West Virginia isn't holding up its end of the bargain,” he said.

“That's not fair to these folks.”

The bill “decouples” greyhound racing at casinos in Nitro and Wheeling, eliminating a requirement in current law that the

casinos must have racing licenses and conduct live greyhound races in order to renew state video lottery and table games licenses.

It also raises from 5 percent to 20 percent the percentage of registered voters in the host counties who would have to sign a recall petition for local option elections to repeal table games at the racetrack casinos.

An amendment adopted Tuesday would additionally require the Senate and House of Delegates to adopt a concurrent resolution approving any recall election.

“There is so much that is built into the state budget and dependent on the revenues that flow from these facilities,” Senate Judiciary Chairman Charles Trump, R-Morgan, said of adding the additional threshold to revoke casino gaming licenses.

“In essence, we're taking local control away,” said Sen. John Unger, D-Berkeley, objecting to the amendment, which was adopted on a voice vote.

“The bill usurped the right of the public to petition for a referendum,” Burdette said.

Meanwhile, Sen. Herb Snyder, D-Jefferson, said he was pleased that the bill as advanced would protect the state's thoroughbred industry from similar decoupling at racetrack casinos in Charles Town and Chester, calling it a “show of good faith.”

Sens. Ferns, Gaunch, Kirkendoll, Laird and Unger voted against the bill, which now goes to the House.

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