

THE DERBY INFORMER

State legislators debate reopening horse, greyhound racetracks

Minami Levonowich KU Statehouse Wire Service Mar 10, 2016

TOPEKA – Legislators are considering measures to reopen the Woodlands, a horse and greyhound racing track in Kansas City, Kan., in hopes of boosting the state's economy.

Lawmakers last week held an informational hearing on the economic impact of reopening the Woodlands, which has not had racing since 2008.

Proponents say racing would generate jobs for Kansans and income for the state.

Art Hall, a consultant for the Greater Kansas Racing Alliance, said reopening the Woodlands track and restoring live horse and greyhound racing could mean approximately 4,000 jobs, \$291 million in annual wages, and about \$23 million in annual state and local tax revenue,

"Economic research shows that horse racing and gaming are complementary activities," Hall said. "The close proximity from the Woodlands to the Speedway Casino is actually an economic proportion. If you get a lot of economic activity in one place that supports each other, you get a general economic uplift," he told lawmakers.

To reopen the tracks, lawmakers would have to make changes in the 2007 Kansas Expanded Lottery Act, which allows slot machines to be placed on racetracks, called "racinos. One of the changes would be to lower the tax rate, specified in the Expanded Lottery Act, from 40 to 22 percent in order to help racetracks reopen.

When Wichita businessman Phil Ruffin purchased the Woodlands racetrack in 2015, he had plans to reopen that track along with two other tracks that he owns – Wichita Greyhound Park in Park City and Camptown Greyhound Park in Frontenac. He wanted the tracks to offer both racing and slot machines. When he bought the Wichita Greyhound Park in 1997, he was persistent in attempting to pass the slot machine bill in the legislature so that he could pay the lower tax rate. Ruffin told The Wichita Eagle that his focus has been on jobs, and he says that he could employ around 2,000 people if the proposed bill were to pass.

Gary Guccione, executive director of the National Greyhound Association (NGA), wants the racetracks to reopen for different reasons. He said that about 30 percent of all greyhound farms are in Dickinson County and the county is incredibly proud that the area is universally known as the Greyhound Capital of the World. Dickinson has been home of the NGA for more than 60 years and the Greyhound Hall of Fame since 1973. Guccione said if the tracks reopen, the greyhound breeding industry will increase, and farms will have a chance to prosper.

For these reasons alone, Guccione wants to keep greyhound racing alive and believes that the sport will continue to thrive, even as times change.

"Greyhound racing in this country has been around for 97 years. Prior to that, for thousands of years, greyhounds were being used as a sport," Guccione said. "With all of the technology and cybercasting on off-track betting, it's not at the tracks anymore but there are still lots of people betting on greyhound racing throughout the world and that is going to continue."

Horse racing also has the potential to bring in revenue for the state, supporters said.

Gail Radke, owns the 160-acre Asiel Stables in southern Johnson County, breeds her horses in Kentucky, races them in Illinois, and lives in Kansas. Radke said it's a shame she has to race outside her home state. She and her husband contribute approximately \$17,000 to Kentucky's sales tax coffers and \$340,000 in taxes to Illinois when that money could easily stay in Kansas.

"You can get a feel for the economic impact that our one farm has on the codependent industries in Kansas," Radke said. "Illinois loves to have us because we shore up their revenue stream and we provide jobs."

Opponents of racing say the tax break would have negative impacts on casinos and on community organizations in the state.

Daniel Silva, executive director of the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, said destination casinos, such as Hollywood Casino, have a competitive bid process and a minimum of \$225 million capital investment, which would be hurt by the proposed bill. The proposal to lower the tax rate does not include a competitive bid process, and Silva said that it will generate only a minor increase (\$1.5 million) in capital investment to the state. Giving Ruffin a tax break would be a setback to the community, Silva said.

Carol Marinovich, executive director of Protect the Partnership (a coalition of Wyandotte County voices) and former mayor of Kansas City, supports the 2007 Expanded Lottery Act in the form in which it was originally passed. She says that Hollywood Casino's roughly \$4 million a year in revenues contribute to community organizations, such as the Bonner Springs/Edwardsville Education Foundation and the Boy Scouts.

"(Ruffin) has come into our community looking for a handout that will not only benefit him greatly but it will be at the expense of our community's and state's dollars," Marinovich said. "Why would anyone in Wyandotte County support racing interests that have never invested in our community?"

In her mission to end dog racing, Christine Dorchak, president of the nonprofit advocacy organization GREY2K USA, said that reopening the tracks as an economic engine for the state is misguided. States such as Iowa and West Virginia have tried to use slot machines to prop up greyhound racing, but these efforts have failed and their legislatures have separated greyhound racing from casinos, Dorchak said. She criticizes what she sees as the cruel and inhumane treatment of greyhounds in racing. She also believes that dog racing is not a popular sport any more and that people are not interested in watching "dogs run around in circles."

"Live racing is just no longer popular," Dorchak said. "Those who suggest that it is popular are living in an 8-track (time). It's MP3 time. Nobody is going to pull out those 8-tracks anymore. Those days are long gone."

The House Committee on Commerce, Labor, and Economic Development is considering whether legislation should be introduced.