

Bill would enable new vote on Wichita Greyhound Park slot machines

HIGHLIGHTS

Legislation being pushed by Ruffin Cos.

Opponents say bill would divert money from nearby state-owned casino



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TOPEKA — Sedgwick County residents would have another opportunity to vote on allowing slot machines at the Wichita Greyhound Park if a bill being weighed by the Kansas House becomes law.

HB 2537 would require the county to hold a special election on the issue if at least 5,000 qualified voters sign a petition.

The bill, which is being pushed by billionaire Phil Ruffin, was reviewed by the House Appropriations Committee at a hearing Wednesday, a day after an attempt to force a floor vote on the legislation resulted in two House chairmen losing their chairmanships.

A ballot initiative to allow slot machines at the park failed to pass in 2007.

In addition to enabling a vote in Sedgwick County, the bill would reduce taxes on slot machine revenue in northeast Kansas to allow racetracks to retain a greater share of the profits.

The bill would allow racetracks in northeast Kansas to retain 64.5 percent of the revenue from slot machines instead of 25 percent under current law.

The Ruffin Cos. say this would enable it to reopen the Wichita Greyhound Park and the Woodlands racetrack in Wyandotte County.

“Do you see any racetracks open in Kansas?” Scott Beeler, a representative of the Ruffin Cos., asked at the hearing. “... It is fluff. It is silliness to suggest that somebody is going to invest millions of dollars in that kind of business today that cannot make money.”

Art Hall, an economist working on behalf of the Greater Kansas Racing Alliance, argued that bringing back horse and dog racing would bring 4,400 new jobs to the state.

Christine Dorchak, president of Grey2K USA, an animal rights group that objects to greyhound racing, argued that “it makes little sense to prop up an industry that is in decline everywhere.”

“It’s a losing proposition,” she said. “It’s a bad bet for Kansas.”

Rep. Mark Kahrs, R-Wichita, argued that allowing slot machines at the greyhound park would divert money from the state-owned Kansas Star Casino in nearby Mulvane.

“Wouldn’t we just be taking money from that casino and moving it to Mr. Ruffin’s pockets?” he asked.

Hall said consumers should be able to choose between the two gambling options.

Beeler decried what he called scare tactics being used to prevent the legislation from moving forward. In reference to the Woodlands, Beeler said the legislation was meant to help bring “a private investor to Wyandotte County to reopen a facility that was a shining star” without the use of tax abatements and municipal bonds.

House Speaker Ray Merrick, R-Stilwell, ousted Rep. John Rubin, R-Shawnee, as chairman of the House Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee on Tuesday after the Johnson County lawmaker attempted to force a vote on the bill after the speaker had already assigned it to the Appropriations Committee, sparking a contentious rules debate.

The controversy also caused Merrick to strip Rep. John Barker, R-Abilene, a supporter of the legislation, of his chairmanship of the House Rules Committee, even though he ended up ruling Merrick’s way on the matter.

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