



Carey Theil: Greyhound subsidies built on sand

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Greyhound breeders have operated as a deep pocketed special interest in Charleston for years, despite their insignificance to the state economy.

Their clout was again on display when an annual \$15 million subsidy for dog racing remained intact, even though the House and Senate both overwhelmingly voted to end it. This mandatory handout went untouched after dog race promoters initiated a campaign of misinformation.

Citing an industry-funded study, greyhound breeders told lawmakers 1,700 jobs would be lost if dog racing is allowed to survive or fail on its own. The study based its spurious claim on just 46 responses, of which two-thirds were from out of state.

According to data from the West Virginia Department of Commerce, the actual number of jobs in the greyhound racing



industry is much lower. For example, in 2013 there were only 427 total gambling industry jobs in Ohio and Kanawha Counties combined, where dog tracks are located. It's a safe bet that the vast majority of these jobs are related to casino operations, not dog racing.

Greyhound breeders also alleged the future of local casinos would be endangered by the end of their subsidies. The Senate

bill included language called “decoupling” that protected state revenue by allowing racing to end if it cannot sustain itself. But even without this provision, casinos could manage a reduction or elimination of racing subsidies.

Greyhound racing operates on a points-based system, and local tracks sport some of the highest point values in the industry. Wheeling is currently paying roughly \$140 per point, the second highest in the country. By contrast, greyhound points are worth \$11 in Birmingham, \$13 in Tucson and \$27 in Sarasota. Casino operators could subsidize dog races themselves, if necessary, at a lower point level without impacting the rest of their business.

Finally, greyhound breeders tried to hold their own dogs hostage, threatening danger to the dogs if subsidies were taken away. This is disgraceful and yet another reason why the state should stop propping up this cruel industry.

This scare tactic has been used in other states and proven to be false. For example, in New Hampshire, lawmakers passed greyhound decoupling in 2009. During the debate, racing interests claimed that decoupling could “cause the death of hundreds of greyhounds.” After lawmakers ignored these alarmist claims, a record high of 510 greyhounds were adopted during the final year of racing.

Decoupling is a wonderful opportunity for greyhounds. While some dogs will be sent to race elsewhere, it will give many greyhounds a chance to find homes sooner. Racing dogs have short careers and only race for about 18 months. When decoupling passes, not a single extra dog will need a home that

would not otherwise have been discarded by the industry in the next year or two.

It will also end the cycle of greyhounds being bred, raced for a short period of time and discarded. That's why decoupling is supported by every major humane organization, including GREY2K USA, the ASPCA, the Humane Society of the United States and the Federation of Humane Organizations West Virginia.

It's not too late to fix this problem. The House and Senate have both included greyhound subsidy reductions in their pending budget proposals. Before approving a spending plan, lawmakers should closely examine the bill of goods they were sold by greyhound breeders. If they do, they will discover it is a house of cards built on sand.

Since 2008, nearly 7,000 greyhound injuries have been reported at West Virginia dog tracks, and at least 343 dogs have died. For the greyhounds, and for the state as a whole, lawmakers should end these wasteful subsidies for an industry that is no longer viable.

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