

Seminole OKs new regulations on greyhound race track



Sanford Orlando Kennel Club "Lead Outs" take the greyhounds to the starting box Monday, March 2, 2015. Lawmakers are making another run at reforming the greyhound racing industry — this time armed with the first-ever national report on death and injuries to the dogs. (Red Huber/Staff Photographer) (Red Huber / Orlando Sentinel)



By **Martin E. Comas**

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Seminole officials agreed with residents who want protection for greyhounds.

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Dozens of dog-lovers filled a Seminole County meeting on Tuesday as commissioners agreed to enact new regulations on the county's only greyhound racing facility, the Sanford Orlando Kennel Club.

The action means racing dogs will have to be licensed by the county and greyhound injuries must be documented and the reports made public. Also, dog-racing kennel owners will be required to report what happens to greyhounds after their racing careers are over.

"I don't think an injury report is an undue burden," County Commissioner Lee Constantine said. "These dogs are treated as commodities and deserve protection. ... This is a bold step by this county and by the citizens of this county."

Dog track officials, kennel owners and racing enthusiasts protested the new requirements, arguing that the state already has rules and that the greyhounds aren't being mistreated.

"They're happy. They do what they do best. They run. They compete and they chase," said James Lax, a Longwood resident who owns greyhounds that used to race. "This industry is already regulated by the state. Why add another layer of bureaucracy?"

The new rules were spurred after animal welfare advocates in June submitted a petition to Seminole with enough signatures that would force commissioners to either adopt new regulations on dog racing or put the issue before county voters on the Nov. 8 ballot.

After listening Tuesday to three hours of testimony from residents, commissioners decided to enact an ordinance that will take effect March 1.

Animal advocates pointed out that commercial kennels in Seminole are required to be licensed and inspected, but dog-racing kennels are exempt from those regulations.

"Greyhounds should be treated the same as other dogs throughout the county, but right now they are treated differently," said Christine Dorchak, president and general counsel of Grey2K USA, a greyhound-protection group.

But county attorneys have long said that dog racing is overseen by the state's Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering and that any Seminole regulations would be pre-empted by state law.

In July, Seminole filed a lawsuit asking a circuit judge to clarify that issue. But Seminole commissioners decided on a 4-1 vote to enact the new regulations. County attorneys said they now will drop the suit.

Commissioner John Horan, who cast the vote against enacting the new regulations, said he would rather wait until the court issued a ruling before moving forward.

The new restrictions apply only to the Sanford Orlando Kennel Club on Dog Track Road in Longwood, one of 12 Florida dog tracks.

About 620 greyhounds take part in roughly 200 races a week at the Seminole dog track, kennel officials said. Visitors last year wagered nearly \$19 million there.

Track officials said it has one veterinarian that tends to dog injuries.

The dog track is required to report deaths to the state. According to state records, 28 greyhounds have died at the Seminole facility since May 2013. However, track officials aren't required to report injuries to the state or make those injury reports available to the public.

But Seminole commissioners asked track officials what would be the harm in making those injury reports public.

"I'm having a little bit of a problem in the industry not wanting to report that information," Horan said.

Former Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, representative for the Florida Greyhound Association, said dog racing is already "a heavily regulated industry" in Florida and that the new regulations would put an extra burden on the Longwood racing dog owners.

"Anybody that mistreats a dog at a track in Florida can be banned from a track, and they are banned from tracks," Kottkamp said. "They want to put this track in your county out of business, which is going to lead to the unemployment of hundreds of people."

Greyhound-lovers say race dogs are kept in stacked metal cages for the entire day, except when racing.

"Our No. 1 priority in the state of Florida is greyhound protection," said Kate MacFall, state director for the Humane Society of the United States. "This is a positive opportunity for the greyhounds and for all dogs."

Seminole resident Heather Hayes said greyhounds shouldn't be used for racing.

"We should be protecting these animals," she said.

mcomas@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5718