

Lawrence animal rights advocates speak against greyhound racing bill



In this file photo from February 2007, greyhounds nudge each other for position as they tear around the track during a race at The Woodlands in Kansas City, Kan.

Topeka ? Animal rights advocates from Lawrence were among the people who testified Monday against a bill aimed at reviving the state's dormant greyhound racing industry.

"Greyhound racing is an inhumane activity that's been largely rejected by your constituents and the American public," Midge Grinstead, a Lawrence resident and state director of the Humane Society of the U.S., told the House Federal and State Affairs Committee.

That committee is considering a bill that would reduce the fees that racetrack owners now have to pay for the right to place slot machines in their facilities. The bill is being sponsored by Rep. John Barker, the committee chairman, who is from Abilene, home of the Greyhound Hall of Fame.

Kansas legalized parimutuel wagering on dog and horse races when voters approved a constitutional amendment in 1986. That led to development of the Woodlands race track in Kansas City, Kan., as well as dog tracks in Wichita and Frontenac.

Soon after that, though, Missouri authorized riverboat casinos and the racing industry in Kansas quickly began to fade away.

Race track owners in Kansas lobbied unsuccessfully for years for the right to have slot machines at their facilities, but they were often in competition with other gaming interests that wanted to legalize full-fledged casinos.

Finally, in 2007, Kansas passed the Expanded Lottery Act which authorized both casino gaming at state-owned and operated casinos and slot machines at race tracks. By that time, though, it was too late for the Camptown Greyhound Park in Frontenac, which closed in November 2000.

Meanwhile, owners of the other two tracks never took advantage of the law because it only allowed them to keep 25 percent of the revenue from slot machines. House Bill 2173 would raise that to more than 50 percent.

Terry Humphrey, a lobbyist for the Humane Society Legislative Fund of Kansas, said the bill essentially calls for using slot machines to subsidize greyhound racing, which she called, “a cruel sport that maims and injures, and sometimes kills thousands of dogs in the name of entertainment.”

She also noted that the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kan., voted last spring to prohibit dog racing at the Woodlands in the event that facility ever reopens.

The committee also received written testimony opposing the bill from Kate Meghji, executive director of the Lawrence Humane Society, and Katie Barnett, a Lawrence attorney who practices animal law.

Most other opponents of the bill, however, said the biggest consequence of the bill would be to violate an agreement in place with the Kansas Star Casino in Mulvane, south of Wichita.

The Expanded Lottery Act established four gaming “zones” in Kansas and authorized the Kansas Lottery to operate one gaming facility in each zone, subject to voter approval in the counties where the casino would be located.

In 2007, voters in Sedgwick County rejected a proposal for a Wichita-area casino. But voters in neighboring Sumner County had previously approved one in 2005, and so the south-central Kansas casino was placed in Sumner County.

Peninsula Gaming Partners, LLC, was chosen as the manager of what is now the Kansas Star Casino and paid the state a \$25 million privilege fee. At that time, Sedgwick County voters had rejected allowing a casino to open there or to have slot machines at the race track, and so it was assumed that both of those ideas were off the table as far as Sedgwick County was concerned.

Barker’s bill, however, would authorize a second vote in Sedgwick County. When he introduced a similar bill in 2016, Attorney General Derek Schmidt issued *an opinion* that said such an “after-the-fact change” in state law would be viewed as a breach of contract, entitling Peninsula to repayment of its \$25 million privilege fee, plus 10 percent annual interest.

The committee has scheduled two days of hearings on the bill. Supporters of the bill are scheduled to testify Tuesday.
