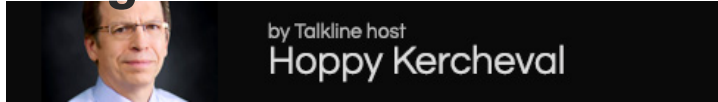


Time for the state to give up on dog racing



Hoppy's Commentary | March 21, 2017 at 12:37AM

As West Virginia lawmakers consider ways to cut the budget, one target is the dog racing industry. The state could save an estimated \$15 million annually if it eliminated the subsidies to dog racing breeders and the purses.

The dog racing proponents argue, not without merit, that when voters approved casino gambling at the tracks a portion of the revenue was designated for the racing industry. Part of the pitch was the casinos would help sustain racing.

However, times have changed. Dog racing is a dying industry in West Virginia, across the country and even around the world. Just six states have dog racing (Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Texas and West Virginia). The number of tracks is down from more than 50 in the 1980s to 19 today.

Dog racing is legal in only eight countries (Australia, China, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam). Last year, New South Wales became the first Australian state to ban greyhound racing after an inquiry found "overwhelming evidence of systemic animal cruelty." The industry claims the charges are overblown.

Dog racing opponents here point to the Spectrum Gaming Group report that concluded that operating the West Virginia tracks at Wheeling and Cross Lanes "does not appear to be in the best interest of West Virginia taxpayers. The report said betting on the dogs had dropped from \$35 million in 2004 to just \$16 million in 2013.

The breeders have argued before the Legislature that dog racing is an economic engine with hundreds of direct and indirect jobs that generate a substantial return on investment. And, in fairness, West Virginia is essentially a partner in the greyhound business so it can be reasonably argued that the state has a responsibility to try to keep the greyhound industry vibrant.

However, the economic reality is that dog racing could not exist in West Virginia without a substantial influx of money that does not come from the dog races themselves. By definition that's a subsidy and it's one West Virginia can no longer afford.

The bill currently under consideration in the Legislature would transfer the money from the breeders fund and the purses to the Excess Lottery Revenue Fund where it could be appropriated by the Legislature to other state functions or simply brought to the bottom line of necessary spending cuts.

West Virginia could maintain its partnership with the greyhounds if the industry was growing and the state's coffers were flush, but that's

not the case. Tough times mean hard choices have to be made; now is the appropriate time for West Virginia to separate itself from dog racing.



Hoppy Kercheval

hoppy@wvradio.com

[@HoppyKercheval](#)

The radio "dean" of West Virginia broadcasters, Hoppy Kercheval joined West Virginia Radio Corporation in 1976.

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