

First hurdle in greyhound funding debate is today



MetroNews staff photo

This is a photo of Bromo, a greyhound that raced on Wheeling Island, taken by the Grey2K organization.

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By Brad McElhinny in News | March 21, 2017 at 9:29AM

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — Senate President Mitch Carmichael says state government has no business in greyhound racing.

“Budgeting is a priority,” Carmichael said during a Monday afternoon interview in his office at the Capitol. “The citizens of West Virginia are investing \$13 million in greyhound subsidies.

“In a time we’re potentially being forced to cut schools, higher education or healthcare because we don’t have enough money in West Virginia, for us to continue to spend \$13 million on greyhound subsidies would be a moral calamity. It’s ridiculous for us to continue to spend such necessary funds in that manner. I’m very focused on ensuring that practice ends this year.”



Mitch Carmichael

The first step in separating state government from greyhound racing likely takes place today. At 3 p.m., the Senate Finance Committee plans to vote on a committee substitute for **Senate Bill 437**, “Discontinuing West Virginia Greyhound Breeding Fund.”

HOPPY KERCHEVAL: Time for the state to give up on dog racing

Besides doing away with the breeding fund, the bill also eliminates state government’s role in the purses for winning dogs. It also “decouples” greyhound tracks from their casinos, meaning that the tracks could continue other forms of gambling even if there isn’t live racing there any more.

The bill would end the fund and transfer the money to the state Excess Lottery Revenue Fund for appropriation by the

Legislature. Money in the fund comes from a portion of video lottery and table gambling revenue at the Wheeling and Charleston casinos.

The Senate Finance Committee delayed the vote while tinkering with the language of the bill to ensure no unintended consequences for the state Racing Commission.

About \$15 million million the state handles for greyhound racing is already a component of the legislative **majority's plan** to balance the budget for the coming fiscal year. As Carmichael alluded, legislative leaders are still trying to identify another \$150 million in cuts, possibly from education, higher education or DHHR.

Gov. Jim Justice's budget retains the state's role in greyhound racing. Justice has described greyhound racing as a vital component of West Virginia life.

Those who support continued racing at West Virginia tracks say it is part of what makes the venues unique — and a potential destination to stand out from casinos in surrounding states.

“That gaming industry is faced with more competition than it's ever been faced with,” state Commerce Secretary Woody Thrasher said in response to a question about greyhound racing Monday at a gathering of state tourism leaders.



Woody Thrasher

“If we're going to be successful, we have to be able to up our game, we have to be flexible, we have to diversify the gaming experiences we offer. So the governor is behind that. Those gaming industries, which are typically on those border states need to be supported, need to be allowed to be creative with how they generate revenue.”

Those who oppose greyhound racing have had an increased presence at the state Capitol the past couple of days. Among them has been Carey Thiel, executive director of Grey2K, a group advocating for the end of greyhound racing.

“It's heartening that the Legislature is poised to address this issue,” Thiel said. “Last year the House and the Senate both overwhelmingly voted to end these subsidies but the legislation stalled after, in my opinion, scare tactics were used to protect the status quo.”

Even if the Senate Finance Committee votes to end the state's role in greyhound racing, Thiel believes the battles will continue.

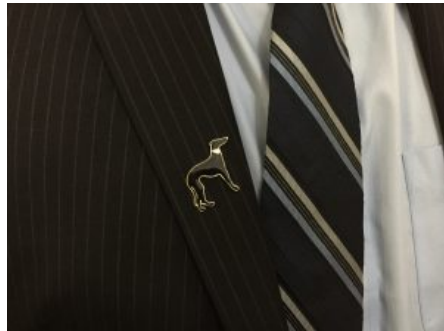
“There's no question that this is a bill from a humane perspective that will give these dogs another chance to leave this industry and find homes I believe the subsidies are essentially indefensible. We're optimistic, and I expect the greyhound breeders to use every tactic they can think of to derail it.”

Supporters of greyhound racing, particularly the greyhound breeders association, have pointed to jobs and economic activity associated with the industry. Thiel claims the economic impact argument is overblown.

“Even though the other side is making these arguments, I’m optimistic,” he said. “I think there’s a majority in the Legislature for the notion this should not be subsidized.”

Thiel thinks even the governor, who has a portrait outside his office with his family and five dogs, can be persuaded.

“I’m puzzled by his position so far,” Thiel said. “I don’t understand it. I’m optimistic that when the administration really looks at this issue, they will agree that this is a good bill that should pass.”



Brad McElhinny/MetroNews
State GOP Chairman Conrad Lucas was wearing this greyhound lapel pin at the Capitol.

Conrad Lucas, chairman of the state Republican Party, was accompanying Thiel around the Capitol on Monday and wearing a metal greyhound lapel pin.

“West Virginia has been in a budget crisis that has been well-publicized for several years now. This is a way for the state to save \$15 million, so we already see the Republican Legislature looking at this issue because of the fiscal responsibility they feel right now,” Lucas said.



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