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Bills to cut WV state greyhound funding advance

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AP file photo

Bills to eliminate \$15 million in annual state subsidies for greyhound racing purses advanced in both the House and Senate Finance committees Wednesday afternoon.

Senate Finance members advanced their version of the bill (SB347), which would also “decouple” the requirement that the state’s two greyhound racetrack casinos feature live racing in order to maintain state licenses for video lottery and table games, on a divided voice vote.

Later Wednesday, the House Finance Committee voted to originate a nearly identical bill to end the greyhound subsidy. It also advanced on a divided voice vote.

In the Senate, Sen. Ron Stollings, D-Boone, said the elimination of greyhound racing could spur voters in the host counties of the racetrack casinos to exercise provisions in state law for local option elections to recall gaming licenses for the casinos.

“These are racinos for a reason. For a long time, a lot of folks in West Virginia would not allow gaming,” Stollings said. “We could potentially kill the goose that’s laying the golden egg.”

In 2012, then-state Republican Party chairman Mike Stuart announced plans for a petition drive to recall the table games license for the Mardi Gras Racetrack and Casino in Nitro, contending that casino management had failed to make promised improvements to the facility when voters approved table games at the casino in a 2007 referendum.

That sparked an uproar after Mardi Gras officials said the loss of table games would close the casino and cost 850 jobs. Stewart subsequently ended the petition drive, and soon after, resigned as party chairman.

In House Finance Wednesday, Delegate Erikka Storch, R-Ohio, said legislators are focusing on the \$15 million of potential savings, and overlooking costs to the state of eliminating greyhound racing at the two tracks. The other greyhound racetrack casino, Wheeling Island, is in Storch’s district.

Steve Sarras, president of the West Virginia Kennel Owners Association, told both committees he believes elimination of greyhound racing would result in the loss of 1,700 jobs directly and indirectly tied to the industry, which he said would cost the state \$24 million in unemployment benefit payments.

“We’re going to lose a lot of people. We’re going to lose a lot of jobs, and we’re going to lose a lot of economic impact,” Sarras said.

This marks the third straight year the Legislature has attempted to eliminate the greyhound subsidy, which is funded through a percentage of racetrack casino video lottery profits.

In 2014, the Legislature commissioned a study that found the subsidies account for about 95 percent of greyhound racing purses, as live wagering and attendance at the two racetracks has plummeted from the heyday of greyhound racing in the mid-1980s.

Also, greyhound racing has been targeted nationally by groups that consider it inhumane, the largest being GREY2K USA.

After Wednesday’s Senate vote, Christine Dorchak, president and general counsel of GREY2K, touted the legislation.

“This is a critical step, both for the humane treatment of our canine friends and to ensure that West Virginia citizens no longer spend millions backing a Depression-era style of gambling that is no longer popular,” Dorchak said.

The legislation sets aside \$1 million to promote adoption of greyhounds bred for racing, and to cover costs of placing greyhounds in no-kill animal shelters pending adoption.

The bills now go to the Senate and House floors for consideration.

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