

Bill eliminating greyhound breeders fund advances

WHEELING — A bill to eliminate West Virginia’s Greyhound Breeders Fund will get a vote on the Senate floor.

The Senate Finance Committee on Wednesday advanced Senate Bill 437, which would discontinue the West Virginia Racing Commission’s special account known as the West Virginia Greyhound Breeding Development Fund. Members voted by voice vote, and there were both “*ayes*” and “*nays*” heard.

The committee had delayed a decision on the measure Tuesday as members sought answers to what effect the bill might have on breeders pensions plans established by the tracks.

Counsel informed the members Wednesday the committee’s attorney didn’t believe the bill “*would have ended*” the pension funds, but language clarifying fees that will be placed into the fund would be added to the legislation.

In short, dog tracks that stop racing won’t stop making contributions to the pension funds, counsel said.

“I don’t know about Wheeling, but I know (Mardi Gras Casino and Resort in Cross Lanes) has set up a 401(k) plan for its breeders, and that fund has a contribution coming,” said Sen. Mike Hall, R-Putnam, chairman of the Finance Committee.

Sen. Mike Maroney, R-Marshall, spoke up and said the committee should hear from someone representing the West Virginia Kennel Owners Association before members voted on the measure.

Alan Pritt, a lobbyist for the group, said SB 437, if approved by the Legislature, would result in the loss of about 1,700 jobs in the state’s dog racing industry. In addition, West Virginia would miss out on licensing revenue, and pay out unemployment to the displaced workers.

There would also be a loss in tax revenue resulting in the potential decline in crossover play at the tracks, according to Pritt.

Gov. Jim Justice has proposed eliminating the \$15 million in payouts expected to be made to dog breeders next year by the state as the state seeks to eliminate a projected \$455 million deficit for next year.

But Pritt disputed the \$15 million figure, and he estimated the elimination of dog racing in West Virginia would instead cost the state closer to \$24 million.

“That’s a conservative estimate, because there are families that would have to relocate,” he said. “For many, this is their lifestyle. It is no different to them than being a farmer. They will move where they can race greyhounds. ... I understand the state has a budget crisis, but this will cost the state more than they will get.”

Maroney questioned the job data information provided by Pritt.

“I’m not sure where you’re getting the number of jobs from, but I agree there will be jobs lost,” Maroney said. *“That is why it is difficult to support this.”*

Pritt said he was citing figures from a report conducted by the Spectrum Gaming Group in 2014 — a study commissioned by the West Virginia Legislature.

An organization that seeks to eliminate greyhound racing at American tracks commended the Senate Finance Committee members for advancing the bill.

“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,” said Christine Dorchak, president and general counsel of Grey2K USA, in a released statement. *“Hundreds of dogs are injured and killed every year for the perverse enjoyment of a dwindling few old-time gamblers. No matter where someone stands on the issue of gambling, it doesn’t require the maiming of beautiful dogs in order to operate the state’s casinos. Forty states have already said no to this inhumane form of entertainment. ... Our goal is to make sure that every racing greyhound has a pathway to adoption.”*

If passed by the Senate, the measure would move on to the House for consideration.

Carey Thiel, executive director of Grey2K USA, said he is confident there are enough votes in both chambers of the West Virginia Legislature to approve SB 437.
