

House passes bill eliminating state funding for greyhound racing

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Greyhound racing may be coming around its final turn in West Virginia, after the House of Delegates voted 56-44 Saturday for passage of a bill eliminating the state's \$15 million annual purse fund subsidy (SB 437).

During an extended debate on the measure, opponents of the bill said it would put as many as 1,700 people out of work, would hurt the two cities where greyhound racetracks are located, and could cause a downturn in casino profits that are distributed to cities and counties statewide.

Proponents argued that in the midst of an ongoing budget crisis, the state cannot afford to support what was called a dying sport.

"This budget, doggone it, there's not one easy decision with this thing," said House Finance Chairman Eric Nelson, R-Kanawha, explaining the need to set priorities to deal with a \$500 million shortfall in the 2017-18 state budget.

"The priority is, do we use this amount of money to support purses, or do we look at higher ed and have an affect on that. Do we look at health programs?"

Opponents – many from the Northern Panhandle, where one of the greyhound racetrack casinos is located at Wheeling Island – argued the defunding will cost more than it will save through lost jobs and businesses at greyhound kennels, feed stores, veterinarian offices and other related businesses.

"What's the one thing we came here for that we all agree on, that we all campaigned on? Jobs," said Delegate Shawn Fluharty, D-Ohio.

Delegate Erikka Storch, R-Ohio, said the city of Wheeling will lose funds it uses for downtown revitalization and to stabilize municipal police and fire pension funds if greyhound racing is defunded.

"It will destroy jobs and economic activity in the Northern Panhandle," she said.

Under the bill, which would "decouple" the casinos from the requirement that they offer live greyhound racing to maintain state video lottery and table games licenses, the casinos could relocate within their counties, with permission from the Lottery Commission – and there is concern Wheeling Island casino could move to the Highlands, a shopping and entertainment complex outside of the city limits.

Delegate Joe Canestraro, D-Marshall, argued instead of restructuring state government, the Legislature is focused on picking off comparatively small, vulnerable programs such as the Courtesy Patrol and greyhound racing.

"All this body has done is vote to cut low-hanging fruit under the illusion we're right-sizing government," he said. "What we're doing is we're taking jobs and revenue from our districts."

Delegate Mike Caputo, D-Marion, said when past legislators voted to legalize video lottery and, later, table games at the state's racetrack casinos, they did so with the pledge that greyhound and thoroughbred racing at the tracks would be preserved.

"We always assured people in the industry that we couldn't have one without the other," he said. "We've got a little bit of integrity to uphold here for past Legislatures who passed these funds."

Nelson, however, noted racetrack video lottery was legalized in 1994, and table games in 2007, in part, because of a steady decline in profits from wagering on greyhound racing, a downturn that began in the late 1980s.

He said the bill does not ban greyhound racing, and the racetrack casinos can continue racing if revenues from live wagering and simulcast betting are sufficient to support it.

Delegate Cindy Frich, R-Monongalia, called greyhound racing a dying sport, citing a Spectrum Gaming Group study from 2015 showing the state subsidy accounts for 95 percent of racing purses, and 65 percent of those purses go to out-of-state greyhound owners.

She also alluded to humane issues with the breeding and racing of greyhounds, stating, "There's a reason why people in this country don't like this sport, and states are banning this sport."

West Virginia is one of six states where greyhound racing is still legal and operating.

The bill provides \$1 million for a fund to assist in adoption of greyhounds at racing kennels. It also provides \$1.5 million for administrative funds for the state Racing Commission.

The remaining funding, about \$13.5 million, would be available to close gaps in the 2017-18 budget, Nelson said.

Grey2K USA, a national group that opposes greyhound racing for humane issues, called the vote “a happy finish line” for greyhound racing in the state.

“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 funding a Depression-era style of gambling that is no longer popular,” said Grey2K USA president Christine Dorchak after the vote.

The bill goes to Gov. Jim Justice, who, in the past, has said he supports greyhound racing for its tourism potential, but he has suggested he will not intervene if the defunding is a component of reaching a budget agreement.

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