

Time to End Greyhound Breeders' Subsidies

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For months, lawmakers have worked to come up with a budget agreement and avoid a government shutdown, but so far a final budget has not been completed. To put the impasse in jargon Gov. **Jim Justice** might appreciate, this is a dog that won't hunt.

It is time for lawmakers to take another look at ending \$15 million in annual subsidies for greyhound racing. This spring, the full **Legislature** voted to end the government handout, but the dog racing subsidies were loyally guarded by Gov. Justice, who vetoed the legislation.

For the governor, allowing this would be an opportunity to demonstrate the same budget flexibility he is seeking from lawmakers. For lawmakers, it would give them a chance to fund necessary priorities, like education and public safety, rather than prop up a moribund dog race

industry with a poor record on animal welfare issues. I represent Morgantown, and I see daily the impact of higher education in our state. It is insulting to West Virginia that we would prop up a dying industry while cutting higher education.

Perhaps we should throw the governor a bone. It's quite possible he was confused by the false arguments greyhound breeders and their supporters made during the legislative session. They blatantly misrepresented the findings of a report done for the state by **Spectrum Gaming**. The report found that the actual number of greyhound jobs was only 618 — many of those part-time — and “the displaced greyhound employees could be retained by the tracks in new positions.” The breeders even claimed that the payments aren't subsidies, an argument so phony it can be defeated by simply looking in the nearest dictionary.

Spectrum also found an incredibly small number of individuals are being enriched by the subsidies, with nearly half of all subsidy dollars paid out to just 10 individuals. Roughly two-thirds of all subsidy dollars immediately leave West Virginia and are paid to greyhound breeders in other states. At Wheeling, Spectrum found that more subsidy dollars were being paid to Kansas residents than to West Virginia residents.

Finally, Spectrum found that the state itself is on the verge of losing money on greyhound racing, because dog race revenues may no longer cover the cost of regulation. West Virginia is facing an unprecedented budget crisis, and it's imperative that every single dollar be spent wisely. The government must be more efficient than ever. Everyone knows a lean dog runs fast.

In 2007, **Robert Byrd** told his **U.S. Senate** colleagues that he couldn't “even begin to understand how human beings can be so cruel to man's best friend.” Greyhound racing is an example of this cruelty. According to state records, 492 greyhounds were injured at West Virginia dog tracks in 2016, including 166 dogs which suffered broken bones and 16 dogs that died. These aren't just statistics; they are greyhounds that were never given the chance to have real homes and loving families. Dogs like BA Beaty Bad Ax, a 3-year-old white and fawn greyhound that died Feb. 9 after suffering a broken leg and broken skull during a race at Wheeling. She died senselessly for a failing industry that cannot sustain itself without government handouts.

The greyhound subsidy program was created in 1994 in an attempt to revive dog racing. It failed, and in the next 20 years gambling on live races in the state fell by 71 percent. Iowa and Rhode Island adopted similar greyhound subsidy schemes at the same time as West Virginia; both of

these programs failed and were later reversed. It's time to create a new policy rather than double down on a mistake from 1994. For the greyhounds, and for all of the state's citizens, the dog race subsidies must end.

This week, during our special session, I was proud to re-introduce the legislation that passed both chambers during the regular session that would end the greyhound breeders' fund and save taxpayers precious resources during this difficult budget time. It is my hope this legislation moves forward and we can take a look at other ways to tighten our budget as time moves forward.

Delegate Cindy Frich, R-Monongalia, is chairman of the House Banking Committee. She was first elected to the House in 2002 and again in 2012.