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Sachs' bill would let greyhound tracks drop races and still offer card games

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Updated: 9:31 p.m. Wednesday, March 16, 2011

Posted: 8:52 p.m. Wednesday, March 16, 2011

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TALLAHASSEE — Greyhound racetrack operators, including Palm Beach Kennel Club, could quit offering dog races and still run the more lucrative card rooms under a measure narrowly approved by a Senate committee Wednesday afternoon.

The bill (SB 1594), sponsored by Sen. Maria Sachs, D-Delray Beach, would do away with the 15-year-old live-racing requirement in an effort to keep the tracks afloat as their revenues and attendance declines.

"Greyhound racing is a dying industry in this state," Sachs said before the 7-5 vote.

Representatives of Palm Beach Kennel Club said it would continue to run live races but they support Sachs' proposal because they believe it would clean up the industry and sweeten the track's fortunes with increased profits from simulcast racing.

Between 2002 and 2010, gambling on the live races dropped by more than half and the purses paid on the races declined by 69 percent, causing the taxes and fees paid to the state by its 13 greyhound tracks to plummet 96 percent, according to Department of Business and Professional Regulation data.

Track operators currently are forced to run a certain number of dog races each year, depending on when they received their card-room licenses, to keep the card rooms open. Smaller tracks losing money on the dog races may be forced to run the dogs too hard and too often, Sachs said, to keep their profitable card games going.

More affluent greyhound operators would be happy if their seedier competitors stop racing, said Palm Beach Kennel Club lobbyist Brian Ballard.

"We think there could be a better product to the people who come to PBKC by giving folks who don't want to be in this business a way out. It's better for us," he said.

Cutting back on the number of races statewide would improve the quality of the existing races, increase the pay-outs and enhance the value of the live races simulcast in other racetracks, Ballard said.

"It makes the product better. Those people who want to use it will pay better purses for the dogs and frankly take better care of their animals. We support the notion that you shouldn't be forced to do this," he said.

But Jack Cory, a lobbyist for the Florida Greyhound Association, said Sachs' bill would "eliminate 3,000 jobs in Florida, \$50 million in economic impact and \$5 million in revenue to the state."

Kennel operator Norm Rader, of West Palm Beach, attended the meeting in Tallahassee and said Sach's proposal is problematic for him because it will be harder for him to place dogs that aren't competitive enough to run at better venues -- about half the dogs he starts out with.

That's fine with Sachs.

"I want the pool to shrink," she said. "I want them to breed fewer dogs and that will lead to higher quality racing."

Nationally, dog racing has declined by half over the past five years and only exists in seven states.

Greyhound racing has a long history in Florida, with the first track in Florida being built in what later became Hialeah in 1922.

Opponents of greyhound racing have tried for years to "decouple" the card rooms from the racing requirements but have been thwarted until now by track operators.

Last year, 33 greyhounds were found dead at a small track in Ebro. The owner of the dogs, who operated a kennel at the facility, was charged with animal cruelty.

But interest in the sport has nearly disappeared, and reports about mistreatment of the dogs have changed the public's view of racing, said Grey2K USA executive director Carey Theil.

"The world has changed," said Theil. "The gambling world is moving away from live racing toward other forms and there's a huge cultural shift in how we view animal issues generally."

Sachs' bill would also establish a single 3.45 percent tax rate for all the tracks, which now varies from .05 to 5.5 percent. But she said her measure would be revenue-neutral because the \$6.9 million currently given in tax credits for the tracks would go down.

The House has not yet scheduled its companion bill for a hearing, and Senate President Mike Haridopolos said it is not one of his priorities but that the bill makes sense.

"I've seen first-hand. No one watches the dog races any more. So they're making them run races that no one's watching or I guess even betting on," Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island, said.