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Committee unleashes greyhound racing from track gambling

Florida's greyhound track owners won another round in their quest to phase out the unprofitable elements of their greyhound racing operations. A bill to end the state requirement that they operate 100 live races a year in order to offer existing card games and slot machines passed the House House Business and Consumer Affairs Committee Tuesday. It had passed its first Senate committee last week.

Rep. Dana Young, the Tampa Republican sponsoring the bill, said that since 1990 the amount of taxes the collected by state for greyhound racing has declined 96 percent. "We are reaching a point where it may cost more for [the Department of Business and Professional Regulation] to regulate this industry than the state collects in taxes from these industries," she said. "These numbers make it abundantly clear the public interest is waning...For us to create a false market for the dog breeding product at the expense of taxpayers simply makes no sense."

Although Young said that the bill "does not eliminate a single job" but instead allows the free market to decide, the lobbyist for the Greyhound Racing Association in Florida argued that the will effectively eliminate 3000 jobs. For example, he said, that includes 250 jobs in Hialeah; 275 in Palm Beach, 275 jobs in Tampa and St. Petersburg, 150 jobs in Brevard and 250 jobs in Jacksonville.

"In this economy I respectfully suggest it is not morally right to eliminate 3000 jobs," he said.

Rep. Joseph Abruzzo, a West Palm Beach Democrat, said that he spoke to several of the largest track owners who say they are going to continue to operate their tracks and race as long as it remains profitable, they just don't want the state dictating how many races they run.

Gary Rutledge, a lobbyist representing the St. Petersburg Kennel Club and Hollywood's Mardi Gras Gaming agreed.

"This is an issue about whether or not businesses should be compelled to conduct activities which are unprofitable," he said. "There is not business in this state that I know of that wants to engage in a practice which loses money."

He told the committee that the bill will not "allow for any additional gaming activities" but instead will result in a "the reduction of greyhound racing in this state."

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March 2011

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		



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Animal rights activists commended the legislation, urging the committee to put an end to what Christine Dorchakshe of Grey2k called the cruel conditions for the dog, which are "kept in their cages all day."

Arizona and Iowa have also recently eliminated rules that require live racing at greyhound tracks and "we'd like to see florida end this cruelty as well," she said.

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