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Track Termination?

Live racing at Tucson Greyhound Park could soon be decreased or even eliminated

by [Tim Vanderpool](#)

A measure trotting through the Arizona State Legislature would end most live dog racing at Tucson Greyhound Park.

Funny thing is, track officials actually asked for the legislation to be introduced. That's according to Rep. Vic Williams, the District 26 Republican sponsor of HB 2536.

His measure has already passed through the House, and is now headed for the Senate Economic Development and Jobs Creation Committee.

At its core, the legislation would allow Tucson Greyhound Park to reduce the number of days it's required to host live racing. Currently, the track needs to have at least nine races a day, four days each week, if it also wants to conduct much more lucrative simulcast or pari-mutuel wagering.

The bill forwarded by Williams would reduce live-racing requirements to only 100 days per year.

Even those live races—seen as a sop to greyhound-kennel owners, who are the real losers here—could eventually go away.

Most are betting are on the bill's passage, particularly since there are few people fighting it. HB 2536 is avidly supported by opponents of greyhound racing, because it would lead to the local demise of a sport they consider archaic and cruel—and because simulcast racing tends to focus on horses.

Live racing also costs taxpayers a bundle. According to a 2007 review by the Arizona Office of the Auditor General, exemptions and tax credits for the racing industry cost the state \$44 million in revenues between 2001 and 2006.

Consider that in fiscal 2008 alone, Tucson Greyhound Park pulled in a cool \$16.2 million in simulcast wagers, made more than \$3.4 million—and paid nothing in pari-mutuel betting taxes. Meanwhile, live-racing attendance has dropped by nearly 70 percent in recent years, but the state is still on the hook to regulate it.

All of which makes it quite obvious from whence HB 2536 came.

"I was asked by the track owners to bring the bill forward," says Williams. "This bill is in support of the dog track and their economic interest, and their viability to stay open here in Southern Arizona."

Is it also a tacit admission that actual live greyhound racing is on the way out? "I'm not going to get into that," Williams says. "You're going to have to ask the track. But it's my understanding that they're more economically viable the less that they race at this time."

A call to Tom Taylor, the general manager of Tucson Greyhound Park, was not returned.

The possible demise of Tucson dog racing seals the deal for GREY2K USA, a Massachusetts-based group that aims to eliminate all greyhound wagering across the country. In fact, says group president Christine Dorchak, GREY2K is more than a little familiar with Rep. Williams' legislation. "The beauty of this bill is that it's something we filed last year, and we were openly asking for the support of the dog-track owners. But they weren't quite ready to get onboard with it.

"This year, they beat us to the punch," she says. "They apparently not only saw the value of our idea, but they

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TIM VANDERPOOL

Could HB 2536 mean an eventual end to greyhound racing in South Tucson?

also decided they wanted to make the bill their own."

But there's also a bit of subterfuge animating this measure.

"The owners of Tucson Greyhound Park would like to get authorization for slot machines," says Dorchak. "That's what their goal seems to be, just as it's the goal of other tracks around the country that don't already have expanded gambling. They want to walk away from greyhound racing."

As it happens, earlier this year, state Rep. John Fillmore, an Apache Junction Republican, introduced a bill that would legalize some casino-style gaming at horse and dog tracks. The measure received a cool reception from legislative leaders, however, and hasn't seen much action. The entire concept of expanded gaming has consistently drawn fierce opposition from Native American tribes—which helped kill a similar proposal back in 2002.

But Williams' bill seems destined for a brighter fate. According to Dorchak, that's a blessing for Arizona; her group recently released a "white paper" summarizing all the ways that greyhound racing continues to burden the state and mistreat animals. It notes that, of the five live-racing dog tracks once scattered across Arizona, Tucson Greyhound is the sole survivor—and it continues to enjoy lavish tax breaks.

With passage of the bill, says Dorchak, those tax breaks would disappear.

So would the cruelty of confining dogs to their cages for hours on end, feeding them degraded meat—which Tucson Greyhound Park denies doing—and shooting them with anabolic steroids to keep the females from going into heat. Though the steroids can inflict permanent damage, and were outlawed in 2008 by the voters of South Tucson, track officials readily admit that the practice continues.

Then there are the dog injuries, a gruesome parade of bone breaks and deep gashes and cracked skulls. Each year, GREY2K USA tallies these wounds for posting on their website. Or at least they did until 2009, when the Arizona Department of Racing suddenly stopped releasing the information, and simply ignored the group's repeated public-records requests.

"The department is simply unaccountable," says Dorchak.

You can see why: Between January 2007 and November 2009, there were nearly 300 injuries to the dogs of Tucson Greyhound Park.

When we called Nolan Thompson, head of investigations and operations for the ADOR, he explained that state-track stewards now simply scan the injury reports at Tucson Greyhound Park, but no longer take them into physical custody. Ergo, they are no longer public records.

Thompson was unable to explain when this policy change took place, or whether it was done at the behest of Tucson Greyhound officials.

To get a better explanation, we then called ADOR Director Lonny Powell. In fact, we called him again and again and again. Not once over several weeks did Powell return a call to detail why his department was withholding this critical information from public scrutiny.

Finally, though, he did respond—through an assistant, Kim McCollum ... who suggested that we file a public-records request.