
Senators say greyhound buyout stalled by complications

By Joel Ebert



Bonnie Jo Mount/Washington Post

Greyhounds at Wheeling Island Racetrack in West Virginia race against each other. At one time, more than 50 tracks operated in 15 states. Now, 21 tracks remain in seven states as legislatures have reexamined the

requirement that casinos operate, and subsidize, greyhound racing.

Despite a push by the West Virginia Greyhound Owners and Breeders Association to eliminate greyhound racing and provide dog owners with a buyout, the first session of the 82nd Legislature failed to address the state's greyhound racing fund, largely due to numerous complications on the subject, according to lawmakers.

The subject is expected to be revisited in the coming months, as the Legislature now heads to interim meetings, which begin in April, before reconvening in Charleston next year.

The session featured some discussion on the once-popular greyhound fund after a report was released by an animal rights organization in January. Grey2K USA released a report which found that subsidies from the state's casino video lottery profits account for more than 95 percent of greyhound racing revenues. Although the greyhound industry had a \$31 million economic impact on West Virginia in 2012, state subsidies accounted for \$29 million, the study noted.

"We suggest that it does not make sense to spend more than \$29 million to make a little over \$30 million with so much of that money going to residents who live in other states. Surely, the State of West Virginia could put the casino supplements to better use for the benefit of West Virginians," the study concluded.

Following the study's release, the West Virginia Greyhound Owners and Breeders Association introduced bills in the House of Delegates and the Senate in hopes of providing financial restitution to those who invested in the greyhound industry.

The Senate bill sought a \$37.5 million buyout, which association President Sam Burdette said would provide dog owners and breeders a return on their investment while also ending greyhound racing this year.

"That way nobody gets hurt," Burdette told the Daily Mail in February.

Despite initial reception from some lawmakers, not everyone was in support of the subsidy.

Sen. Daniel Hall, R-Wyoming, told the Daily Mail on Wednesday that his colleagues were conflicted.

“Do you cut them off cold turkey, do a partial phase out or a buyout?” he asked. “Nobody could come to a consensus as to what was the right thing to do.”

Some decision-makers, which included officials from the state Department of Revenue and Tax Department, were concerned that dog owners could sue the state, Hall said.

“It turned into a lot of uncertainty that never got resolved,” he said. “Nobody knew what the answer was.”

But Senate Finance Chairman Mike Hall, R-Putnam, said discussions were further complicated when it came to the potential buyout.

Mike Hall said it was undecided whether a buyout would be provided to all those who invested in the industry or just those who are currently in operation.

“Some people aren’t active now,” he said.

Another aspect that further complicated matters was how the removal of the breeder’s fund would affect casinos and racinos, which combine casinos and race tracks.

“We have to decide what to do in terms of all these things because our lottery revenue is declining,” Mike Hall said.

Greyhound racing is just one part of a larger discussion that needs to take place in terms of gambling in West Virginia, he explained. “It’s not as easy as you’d think.”

Further complicating matters was the fact that neither the governor’s office nor the House of Delegates weighed in on the matter, which essentially left the Senate as the only body to have significant discussions on greyhound racing this year.

On the final day of session, Mike Hall, along with Sens. Herb Snyder, D-Jefferson; Roman Prezioso, D-Marion; Ron Stollings, D-Boone; and Daniel Hall, R-Wyoming, sponsored a resolution, which passed both chambers, to allow the Joint Committee on Government and Finance to study the state’s racing and gaming industries.

Mike Hall said the review is necessary, even after the Grey2K report.

“I would want to verify everything that report said,” he explained.

The work of the joint committee, which will begin meeting in April, will allow lawmakers to address both the greyhound racing fund and casinos in general during next year’s session.

“A lot has to be done between now and whenever we deal with it,” he said, noting that the review will be a top priority for the committee. “By next year there shouldn’t be any surprises.”

Contact writer Joel Ebert at joel.ebert@dailymailwv.com or 304-348-4843. Follow him on twitter.com/joelebert29.