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Why should W.Va. subsidize animal races?

READERS are well aware of how West Virginia came to be East Las Vegas. The state's two horse tracks and its two dog tracks were in dire straits 20 years ago.

The state allowed the four racetracks to add slot machines with the caveat that some of the money be used to subsidize the racing industry.

But after 20 years, these subsidies total \$92 million a year. Over a decade, that's a great deal of money that does not go to schools, roads and other services of the state.

The Wheeling Intelligencer recently broke down that \$92 million for its readers: \$9 million to horse breeders, \$56.9 million for purses for horse racing, \$6 million for dog breeders and \$20 million for purses for dog racing.

The \$6 million given to dog breeders goes only to breeders in West Virginia, but the horse money has no such restriction and much of the \$9 million given to horse breeders goes out of state.

So not only are West Virginians subsidizing this industry, much of the money is going to people who live in another state.

The Intelligencer, whose circulation area includes two of the state's four racetracks, called in an editorial for an end to these subsidies. The newspaper pointed to the horse-racing subsidies that go out of state.

"That is not how state residents were led to believe the system would work," the newspaper said. "We were told the West Virginia horse and dog racing industries would be helped - not that dozens of breeders from throughout the nation would benefit."

But the argument for reconsidering the distribution of casino cash goes beyond subsidizing breeders who live out of state.

"The money - all \$92 million of it, not just the cash going out of state - ought to be sent to local and state governments, which can put it to good use," the Wheeling newspaper said.

That certainly is food for thought. So is the idea of allowing the casinos to drop racing and concentrate on their main attractions: slot machines and casino games.

The gambling industry has changed over 20 years. The Legislature should allow the casinos to adapt to those changes.

Lawmakers should consider ending the subsidies and directing the money to community needs.