

# The Des Moines Register



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*(Photo: The Register File Photo)*

Wagering is down sharply at Dubuque's greyhound track compared with last year, but there's disagreement whether that's a bad sign for Iowa's dwindling dog racing industry.

Under a \$92 million agreement with the greyhound industry approved by the Iowa Legislature in 2014, Horseshoe Casino in Council Bluffs is permitted to close its money-losing Bluffs Run dog track on Jan. 1 while Mystique Casino in Dubuque was allowed to get out of dog racing late last year.

But the Iowa Greyhound Association, an industry group, is keeping the Dubuque track open with a slimmed-down racing schedule. Between May and July, the track now known as Iowa Greyhound Park reported wagering of \$642,909 on live dog races, which is down 25 percent compared with the same period last year, according to the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission.

Jerry Crawford, a Des Moines lawyer for the Iowa Greyhound Association, said the Dubuque track is still not profitable, but it's ahead of budget in every category and is positioning itself to offer greyhound racing over the long-term as the state's sole remaining dog track. Racing purses - the prize money paid for top-finishing dogs - are the same per week, or a little higher than last year, he added.

"What we are trying to do is make racing special, not make it a 24/7 activity because that model doesn't work. Our approach is succeeding," Crawford said.

Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA, a Massachusetts-based group that views greyhound racing as cruel and inhumane, said the latest wagering statistics are the first evidence that the Dubuque track is failing and headed for permanent closure.

“You can try and put a happy face on it, but when you are down 25 percent, that is somewhere between really bad and catastrophic,” Theil said.

Iowa is one of only seven states nationwide that offer live greyhound races in an industry that has seen a steady decline for decades because of competition from faster-action casino gambling. The dog tracks in Council Bluffs and Dubuque are the only two remaining in Iowa. Waterloo's greyhound track, which had its ribbon cut by Gov. Terry Branstad in 1986, ceased live racing in 1994 and stayed open for simulcasts until 1996.

Under the 2014 bill approved by the Iowa Legislature, \$36 million will be provided to greyhound business owners who want to retire from the industry and to help no-kill animal adoption agencies with the care and adoption of greyhounds that no longer have a place to compete. Another \$36 million will be provided for those who want to remain in the dog racing business at the Dubuque track.

The overall \$92 million cost of the deal – which is being borne entirely by the Council Bluffs and Dubuque casinos – also includes purse money for some dog races at both tracks, plus some additional funds. Both casinos have spent millions of dollars subsidizing greyhound racing and agreed to the expensive agreement as an exit path.

Greyhound industry lawyer Crawford strongly disputed the pessimistic views of animal protection activists. He noted the Dubuque track is offering 90 racing dates this year compared with 120 performances in the past. As a result, he says statistical comparisons are “completely apples to oranges.”

What's significant, Crawford said, is that wagering at Dubuque this year has averaged \$14,611 per racing date, compared with \$10,873 last year. He added that wagering on the export of greyhound races for simulcasts at other gambling facilities is up 19.5 percent per performance, and the May 2015 import of simulcast races from other tracks was the largest in Dubuque history.

Theil of Grey2K counters that fixed costs at race tracks are so high that a reduction in Dubuque's racing schedule won't help much. “Every year the greyhound industry is in decline. There is only a small pool of greyhound gamblers who are betting on these races,” he added.

Brian Ohorilko, administrator of the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission, told The Des Moines Register he agrees with the greyhound industry that overall wagering on Dubuque's dog races is down because of a reduction in the racing schedule. He also noted that dog racing began later than usual this year at Dubuque.

“We expect to see racing again next year at Dubuque. They haven't given us any indication otherwise,” Ohorilko said.



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Meanwhile, overall wagering on live dog races at Bluffs Run in Council Bluffs is also down for 2015. The track, which offers races year round, has had wagering of \$1,718,426 between Jan. 1 and July 31 this year, a decline of 21 percent compared with the same period a year ago.

Bluffs Run spokeswoman Jill Beasley noted that wagering on live racing at the Council Bluffs track has declined every year since 2008. In addition, the track is running 12 races per card in 2015 compared with 15 races per card in previous years in order to reduce the number of greyhounds needed because the track is closing at the end of the year, she said.