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Iowa bill looks to 'sever' state's remaining ties to greyhound racing

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Iowa's licensed casinos would be banned from allowing simulcast greyhound races under a bill moving forward in the Iowa Senate, potentially ending the state's remaining ties to the almost-extinct industry.

The bill, Senate Study Bill 3002, would remove the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission's authority to issue licenses permitting facilities to allow simulcast dog races starting July 1, 2027. It advanced in a Senate subcommittee hearing on Tuesday, Jan. 20.

The state's last surviving greyhound racing track, the Iowa Greyhound Park at Q Casino in Dubuque, closed in 2022. It was among the last remaining live racing tracks in the nation. West Virginia is now the only state that has any live tracks, and dog racing is illegal in 44 states.

The closure of Iowa Greyhound Park followed many others around the country, as animal-welfare activists have raised objections to the treatment of racing dogs. The number of Iowa breeders had dwindled and a few had been in legal trouble.

Florida voters moved to ban greyhound racing by 2021, though the state had the most live racing tracks in the country at the time — accelerating the industry's decline.

Only Prairie Meadows Racetrack and Casino in Altoona, the Wild Rose Casino and Resort in Clinton and Horseshoe Council Bluffs operated by Caesars Entertainment offer simulcast dog racing. In 2024, the most recent data available, those facilities recorded \$2.4 million combined bet on simulcast dog racing.

In 2014, former Gov. Terry Branstad signed a law that allowed two Iowa casinos to get out of greyhound racing as casinos had complained they were subsidizing a dying business. It

shuttered the Bluffs Run track in Council Bluffs in 2015 and shifted management of the Greyhound Park in Dubuque from the casino to the Iowa Greyhound Association. Sen. Ken Rozenboom, R-Pella, said he only recently learned that legislation didn't entirely erase ties to dog racing at Iowa's casinos.

"The dog racing industry has fallen in disfavor around the country," Rozenboom told the Des Moines Register. "It's clearly not a popular thing anymore. And in my view, it's time to, at the state of Iowa, completely sever any relationship we have with greyhound racing."

As written, lobbyists representing casino operators that simulcast dog racing believe the bill would only affect the Clinton casino, which is governed under a different code section than the other two facilities.

Rozenboom said he would look to tweak the bill's language to reflect his intention to implement a ban of simulcast dog racing at all of Iowa's licensed casinos.

Animal welfare advocates say industry is not 'forward looking'

Animal welfare advocacy groups including Humane World for Animals, Animal Rescue League Iowa and GREY2K USA Worldwide supported the legislation.

Carey Thiel, executive director of GREY2K USA Worldwide, which advocates to end dog racing, said Iowa lawmakers should advance the proposal because of the dog racing industry's animal welfare problems. He said greyhounds sustain injuries that are sometimes fatal, are confined in small cages and use live rabbits for training.

He said Iowa's 2014 bill signaled this industry should not be supported and thought that allowing simulcast dog races was a "loophole" left in the law.

U.S. Rep. Zach Nunn, a Republican who represents south-central Iowa's 3rd Congressional District including Des Moines, introduced a federal bill that looks to close such loopholes. It would implement a national ban on greyhound racing, prohibit gambling on live and simulcast greyhound races and outlaw the export of American greyhounds for racing abroad.

"This is not an industry that is a forward-looking industry," Thiel said. "... This is an industry that's going to go away."

Some casino operators push to preserve simulcast dog racing revenue

Lobbyists for the Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association, Iowa Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners Association, Wild Rose Entertainment and Caesars opposed the legislation. Prairie Meadows is registered as undecided because the way the bill is written doesn't affect the facility.

Jon Moss, executive director of the Iowa Horsemen's Benevolent & Protective Association, disputed that this allowance was a "loophole."

He raised concerns about the thousands of dollars in revenue that would no longer flow to West Virginia's remaining two live dog racing tracks or to the Horsemen of Iowa Simulcasting Association. The association, which is its own standalone entity launched in 2023 as simulcasting waned at brick-and-mortar facilities, has an agreement only with the Clinton facility.

"It's not just a little hit or slap on the wrist to the operations of West Virginia," Moss said. "It's a death knell to the simulcasting operation operating currently."

Jeff Boeyink, a lobbyist representing Wild Rose, said the Clinton facility has received lots of traffic from Dubuque since its casino ended simulcast dog racing.

"Contrary to popular belief, not all casino businesses in Iowa are robust and have large margins, particularly in places like Clinton," Boeyink said. "Margins tend to be relatively thin, and so every amenity that you have that brings patrons into the business is meaningful to you."

Senator has 'goal to get this over the finish line'

Rozenboom, who fundamentally opposes gambling and is chair of the Senate State Government Committee taking up this bill, said that revenue is money "out of Iowans' pockets, some whom probably can't afford it."

"I will be sensitive to concerns expressed, but I certainly have a goal to get this over the finish line," Rozenboom said.

Sen. Jason Schultz, R-Schleswig, wanted more information but supported advancing the measure out of subcommittee but said "that's not a promise of support going forward."

Sen. Catelin Drey, D-Sioux City, did not sign off on the measure because she wanted to better understand the proposal's impact.

The legislation heads to the full Senate State Government Committee for further consideration.

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