

Homes for greyhounds, jobs for workers

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In November, the citizens of Massachusetts overwhelmingly voted to phase out dog racing in the Commonwealth. In 12 of 14 counties, and in nearly 300 of 351 cities and towns, people chose compassion over cruelty on Election Day.

During the next 13 months, Wonderland and Raynham parks will be required to wind down their gambling enterprises. It no longer will be legal to take or place bets on racing greyhounds after Jan. 1, 2010.

Despite the current economic challenges, the voters decided that the serious injuries dogs suffer and the lives of confinement they endure are not acceptable. In short, our economy should not be based on cruelty to dogs.

So what's next? Questions have been raised about the fate of the greyhounds as well as that of local track workers.

The Greyhound Protection Act was supported by every major shelter in the state, including the MSPCA and the Animal Rescue League. It also won the endorsement of nearly 100 local veterinarians and animal hospitals. We are prepared to receive any and all available greyhounds once the phase-out begins. Since Christmas Eve 2004, 13 tracks across the country have closed or ended live racing, prompting the placement of thousands of dogs into loving homes. So while some kennel operators may keep their fastest dogs running on what has become a shrinking national circuit, we expect Massachusetts to follow the humane trend.

In terms of the workers, help is coming on two fronts. The morning after the election, Gov. Deval Patrick announced that his labor chief had been assigned to create a retraining program for all exiting track workers, including opportunities for secondary certificates and college degrees. According to published reports, Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development Suzanne Bump will look to both state and federal programs to reach this goal.

On a separate track, the proponents of Question 3 are committed to re-filing and pushing for legislation that transfers state money currently available to track owners to instead provide financial assistance for workers. Three separate trust funds now operate to sustain building and repair at the dog tracks, cover advertising, and offer higher prizes. This money can certainly be put to better use now.

As 2009 approaches, we remain committed to securing a safe transition away from the cruelty of dog racing in Massachusetts. In a state known for its progressive attitudes, a healthy balance can be found for both people and dogs.

Dorchak is the president and Theil is the executive director of GREY2K USA, which is a national, non-profit greyhound protection group based in Somerville. To learn more, go to www.grey2kusa.org. ■