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In bid to reduce greyhound racing in Florida, strange allies emerge

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By KATHLEEN HAUGHNEY, Tallahassee Bureau
4:42 p.m. EST, January 17, 2012

TALLAHASSEE —

A movement to drastically cut down on dog racing in Florida has made unlikely bedfellows of dog track owners and animal rights activists.

Track owners see a state requirement that they run dog races in exchange for being allowed to operate other forms of gambling as onerous. The Humane Society and a greyhound rescue organization see the sport as cruelty to animals.

Standing at the center are state Sen. [Maria Sachs](#), D-Delray Beach, and Rep. Dana Young, R-Tampa, who are trying to sort it out.

Sachs and Young are sponsoring two bills, SB 382 and HB 641, which would end the requirement that the tracks conduct a given number of dog races as a precondition for being allowed to offer poker rooms and slot machines. Tracks could set their own racing schedule, or not race at all.

Sachs called dog racing a "dying business," and said if the state ended the racing requirement, market forces would allow each track to freely determine how many races it should run _ if any.

Pari-mutuels across the state, depending on their license, are required to hold anywhere from 744 to 3,152 dog races yearly. But the pasttime, once profitable, has slumped in recent years.

Dan Adkins, vice president of [Mardi Gras](#) Casino of Hollywood, said he has had to run [dogs](#) at a loss over the last few years. He is unsure of whether he would stop racing totally or implement a reduced schedule should the bill pass. Mardi Gras is currently required by law to host a minimum of 800 live races per year in

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exchange for being allowed to also operate a cardroom and slot machines, according to state records. Palm Beach Kennel Club faces similar requirements.

"For me to be forced to operate something that's a loss to me doesn't seem fair," Adkins said.

However, the proposal to deregulate dog tracks could get overshadowed by the destination casino bill, a massive overhaul of gambling legislation that that would bring three destination casinos to South Florida.

In Florida, there are 14 cardrooms operated by greyhound permitholders, two of which also offer slot machines. But according to a 2011 legislative analysis, the state's pari-mutuel wagering industry has seen a 43.6 percent drop in the amount wagered on dogs over the last decade.

Animal rights activists cheered the legislation sponsored by Sachs and Young as a good way to reduce, or stop, dog racing in Florida.

"Greyhound racing is cruel and inhumane, and the passage of these common sense bills will help thousands of dogs," said Christine Dorchak, president of the greyhound rescue group GREY2K USA. "The passage of SB 382/HB 641 will lead to a significant decrease in greyhound injuries and reduce the number of greyhounds that endure lives of confinement."

Sachs echoed those comments, noting that what once seemed like fun entertainment may no longer suit the times. "This is Florida 2012, not 1931," she said.

Sachs and Young let the dogs do some of the lobbying at the Tuesday news conference they held to promote the legislation. The lawmakers were accompanied by Johnny and Twiggy, former race dogs, who eagerly greeted any onlooker who wanted to pet them.

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