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Greyhound racing bill stumbles, but then races toward the finish

Brent Henzi, 04/29/2011 - 08:36 PM

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Sen. Maria Sachs speaks on the Senate floor. Photo Credit: Ana Goni-Lessan

Tempers flared on Friday as the Senate passed a bill that could mean the end of greyhound racing in Florida.

HB 1145 passed in the Senate by a 25-14 vote, but will now be sent back to the House as a change was made to provide a phase out of what many call a dying industry.

The bill would allow the pari-mutuels to have the more-profitable card rooms without running a certain amount of greyhound races, which could be the beginning of the end for dog racing in the state.

The bill did see a change on Friday when an amendment was adopted that would provide a five-year phase out of tax breaks the tracks get. Bill sponsor **Sen. Maria Sachs**, D-Delray Beach, said the change was to give the industry time to adjust, although it now requires the bill to go back over to the House for reconsideration.

Sachs continued her stance on Friday that the greyhound industry is dying and it is time for state government to step out of the way and no longer subsidize it. She noted that the bill does not ban dog racing, but that it simple lets the market decide its fate. Others have said that maybe four of the current tracks would still keep racing if the measure becomes law.

“What they want to do with their dog racing is up to them,” said Sachs. “But it is going to be based on the market, not what we tell them to do.”

Sachs noted that the bill has provisions to restrict the expansion of card rooms, but those opposed to the bill maintained the argument that the bill is indeed an expansion of gambling and that the number of card rooms will increase.

Meanwhile, others opposed said the bill will put thousands out of work in the dog racing industry who have relied on the government’s laws and regulations to make a living.

“We are pulling the rug out from good, hard working people,” said **Sen. Thad Altman**, R-Melbourne.

But the controversy began before debate when legislators had to temporarily postpone the bill in order to discuss several amendments. When they reconvened, **Sen. Dennis Jones**, R-Seminole, and others removed amendments that would have added protections to the horse racing industry, which is in direct competition with the dog tracks.

Jones said that the amendments would not have been given a proper debate and so he decided to withdraw his amendment with the hopes of bringing it back next year.

However, **Sen. Jack Latvala**, R-Clearwater, took exception to removing the amendment and said that those that did withdraw their amendments on Friday had been “intimidated out of

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them.” He said that it was disappointing when “all of our brains and all of our contributions aren’t being utilized to the best degree.”

Senate President Mike Haridopolos, however, responded there was plenty of time for amendments to be added and that the process has provided plenty of time for debate on the bill.

“This has been the most open Senate, with multiple committee hearings for every individual who wanted it,” said Haridopolos. “Let’s be clear about that.”

As it moves to the House, **Rep. Dana Young**, R-Tampa and sponsor of the House version, called it “a good day” for the bill and that with the withdrawal of the amendments related to horse racing she sees no reason it won’t be sent to the governor.

“I’m very excited that there were several amendments related to horse racing that were all withdrawn,” said Young. “I feel very confident that we’ll be able to get that passed out of the House.”

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Candy Beck

What this Bill does NOT DO!

It does not provide a 5 year phase in; no plan on incremental phase in is defined in this Bill. It takes effect July 1st!

It does NOT provide for the care and welfare of the over 8,000 Greyhounds in the State of Florida! Not 1 word in this Bill protects the Greyhounds. Not 1 dollar of the over \$10,000,000.00 in Tax Breaks goes to the care and welfare of the Greyhounds

There is NO National Organization prepared to take care of the Greyhounds that will be at risk because of this bill

NOT 1 word in this Bill stops the Expansion of the current Gambling activates in the State.

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