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Dog racing foes again seek ban

The Boston Globe

By Sean P. Murphy, Globe Staff | June 10, 2007

Greyhound racing opponents said yesterday they would launch their third campaign for a statewide ban, setting the stage for a debate between those who believe the dogs are treated cruelly and those who say banning the races would hurt an industry that employs thousands of people.

The Committee to Protect Dogs has \$50,000 in seed money to begin collecting petition signatures to get a racing ban on the 2008 ballot, said Carey Thiel, executive director of Grey2K USA, one of the advocacy groups that make up the committee.

Advocates for greyhounds managed to get a similar measure on the ballot in 2000, but it lost by a narrow margin. A campaign to get the measure on the ballot in 2006 stalled when the state's highest court ruled that the wording of the proposal was invalid.

"Today is the first page of the final chapter of the greyhound debate," Thiel said at a meeting of about 30 volunteers that included representatives of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Animal Rescue League of Boston, and the Massachusetts Council of Churches.

"This will be the final battle," he said. "I don't know how it will come out, but one side or the other will score a decisive victory this time."

Thiel said the stakes are especially high this year because of the ongoing push by the Mashpee Wampanoag Indian tribe for a gambling casino in Massachusetts. To open a casino, the tribe must negotiate an agreement with the state, and it's possible the state may permit horse and dog racing tracks to add slot machines as a means of preserving the ailing racing industry.

Rhode Island and other states have allowed racetracks to run slot machines -- creating "racinos" -- to give them a financial boost.

Thiel said that if Massachusetts gave the tracks such a deal -- which would probably be conditioned on their continuing to offer racing -- they would reap enough new profits to fend off any future opposition.

"If the racetracks get cut into the deal for slot machines, you are very likely to see greyhound racing here for generations," he said.

There is some support at the State House for allowing slot machines at racetracks. In 2005, the state Senate voted to legalize the machines at tracks, but the House did not take up the measure, effectively killing it.

Greyhound racing is considered cruel because the dogs are kept in small cages for long periods

between racing dates and suffer injuries, including broken legs, in racing, Thiel said.

The owners of the state's two tracks, Wonderland Greyhound Park in Revere and Raynham-Taunton Greyhound Park in Raynham, have said there is no credible evidence of cruelty in dog racing and that keeping the tracks open saves thousands of jobs.

A racing industry spokesman declined comment yesterday.

The Wampanoags earlier this year received official recognition from the federal government as a tribe, giving them the right to open a casino with slot machines if they have an agreement with the state. The tribe recently bought 350 acres of land in Middleborough, and has formed a partnership with Sol Kerzner and Len Wolman, the billionaire casino developers behind Connecticut's Mohegan Sun.

In 2000, voters rejected a ban on greyhound racing, 51 percent to 49 percent. Last year, the Committee to Protect Dogs gathered 150,000 signatures to get a racing ban on the 2006 ballot, but the state Supreme Judicial Court ruled that the proposed question lacked clarity and ordered it off the ballot.

The first deadline the racing opponents face is Aug. 1. That's when the petition is due at Attorney General Martha Coakley's office, which must pass on the wording of the question.

After that, the group will have nine weeks -- Sept. 19 to Nov. 21 -- to gather at least 66,593 signatures of registered voters, 3 percent of the votes cast in the last gubernatorial election.

The office of Secretary of State William F. Galvin must certify the signatures.

Thiel said his group's goal is to gather 100,000 signatures to be sure the group is well over the minimum required.

At yesterday's meeting in the basement office of Grey2K USA in Somerville, Laura E. Everett, associate director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, a coalition of Protestant and Orthodox churches, pledged support, saying her organization has long been opposed to expanded gambling in Massachusetts, even though its supporters say it would bring new revenue to the state.

"We don't take the moral question off the table when considering expanded gambling," she said. "Gambling means taking money from the people who can least afford to lose it. And for the state to be making money off these people: How can that be compassionate? How can that be ethical?"

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