

Dog-racing foes want poker in spotlight at greyhound parks

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An anti-greyhound dog racing organization says it's time for Florida to change regulations that force many gambling facilities to offer pari-mutuel operations such as dog racing in order to have poker rooms.

And Grey2K USA has an unlikely ally: Melbourne Greyhound Park and a handful of other, smaller dogs tracks in Florida where each year more and more revenues are coming from poker rooms and slot machines, not greyhound dog racing.

Figures from Florida's Department of Business and Professional Regulation figures show that live dog racing at the Melbourne park has brought in \$213,247 in total revenues-- called "handle" in gaming parlance -- through June. By comparison, its poker room, Club 52, was responsible for \$4.4 million in total revenue over that same time. The track does not offer slot machines.

Revenue from simulcasts of dog racing, horse racing and jai alai generate a bit more than \$2 million for Melbourne Greyhound annually, according to General Manager Pat Biddix, , but among the three, dog racing is not the largest money-maker.

It is the live dog racing that's the focal point for Grey2K USA and others.

Florida requires a minimum number of live races at dog parks in order for those establishments to also be able to offer slot machines and poker gambling. Melbourne Greyhound's dog racing operation, which ran Jan. 15 through March 27 this year, brought in the least amount of pari-mutuel receipts of the state's 18 licensed dog-racing tracks.

The Palm Beach Kennel Club in West Palm Beach, which offers year-round live dog racing, brought in nearly \$26 million over the first six months, the most of any greyhound track in the state. It generated \$9.8 million from poker operations.

Melbourne is one of three dog tracks in Florida where card-playing revenues have overtaken receipts from live greyhound racing, figures show. Melbourne's disparity in revenue, though, is the greatest of the state's dog tracks.

"In the gambling industry, dog racing is now like the horse-and-buggy industry in 1920 -- it's becoming an industry from a bygone era," said Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA, a Somerville, Mass.-based organization that focuses on protecting greyhounds.

"There are a few tracks that are sort of emotionally tied to dog racing and are holding out," Theil said, "but the majority of them in Florida are ready to make a transition, and Melbourne is definitely in that group."

Biddix doesn't disagree.

"It's the dog breeders, trainers and operators that want it to keep going," he said. "The animal activists want it to stopped, and the tracks are mixed. If you're still making a profit off your live racing, you may want it to continue. If me and other small tracks are losing money each year on live racing, you would prefer it to stop."

That's also the position of state Sen. Charlie Justice, D-St. Petersburg, who earlier this year proposed, unsuccessfully, an amendment to an agriculture bill that read, "Any mandate that a business be required to conduct live racing of a domestic animal as a

prerequisite for any other commercial enterprise of such business may not be enforced."

A domestic animal is defined as a dog, rabbit, cat or other animal under 150 pounds that is commonly kept as a pet. The wording is specifically tailored to target greyhound racing while not affecting horse racing.

The American Greyhound Track Operators Association, based in West Palm Beach, doesn't dispute the current revenue trends with dog racing. But the organization isn't in favor of changing state regulations requiring pari-mutuel operations in order to have poker rooms.

"We want to do what's most beneficial for the track operators," said Tim Leuschner, the association's president. "Pari-mutuel racing has always been part of the puzzle."

Grey2K US maintains that trends don't favor the sport's viability. It said between 2002 and 2007, the amount of money gambled on greyhound racing fell 42 percent.

Contact Price at 242-3658 or wprice@floridatoday.com.



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Although they give the place its name, the dogs that run at Melbourne Greyhound Park don't draw nearly as much attention or revenue as its poker room. Animal rights groups want to stop the racing, and some pari-mutuel dog track owners agree because the racing is actually a money-loser for them while their gambling business continues to soar. (Rik Jesse, FLORIDA TODAY)