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Foes plan anti-greyhound-racing campaign in Iowa

BY WILLIAM PETROSKI • BPETROSKI@DMREG.COM • OCTOBER 14, 2010

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Animal advocacy groups nationally are joining with Iowa dog lovers and anti-gambling activists to launch a statewide campaign aimed at shutting down the state's dwindling greyhound racing industry.

The issue surfaced during the last session of the Legislature, and activists said this week they are planning a full-fledged effort during next year's session to make dog racing illegal.



State Rep. Mary Mascher, an Iowa City Democrat, said Wednesday she strongly supports the campaign and will introduce legislation in January to permanently halt greyhound racing, which she describes as an inhumane, dying industry. The bill would affect tracks in Council Bluffs and Dubuque.

"This issue is not going to go away until we get rid of dog racing in Iowa. It is inevitable. Whether it happens this coming session or another year or two down the road, it is going to happen," Mascher said.

Only a handful of patrons attend greyhound races, which are subsidized with millions of dollars in profits from racetrack slot machines. That's money that could be better used by Iowa community foundations, she added.

Bob Hardison of Onawa, president of the Iowa Greyhound Association, which supports the dog racing industry, said his organization will fight the shutdown campaign. Greyhound racing supports more than 1,300 jobs in Iowa with more than 350 owners and 70 farms in 30 Iowa counties. The industry generates millions of dollars annually for rural Iowa that is spent on farm supplies, veterinary services and other expenses, he added.

"I don't know of any animal industry in the state of Iowa that is more regulated than the raising of greyhounds. Our facilities are taken care of, and

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our animals are taken care of," said Hardison, who raises greyhounds.

Representatives of the New York-based American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Grey2K USA, a Massachusetts greyhound advocacy group, are visiting Iowa this week to lay the groundwork for a legislative lobbying effort.

They plan to meet with legislators, media representatives and activists. In addition, Grey2K will present a [110-page report on Iowa greyhound racing](#) on Saturday to the Iowa Federation of Humane Societies in Des Moines.

The Grey2K report contends that Iowa greyhounds endure lives of confinement with many dogs kept in small cages for 19 to 21 hours per day. The research also cited state records documenting 530 greyhound injuries between January 2006 and August 2010. Nearly 100 of the injuries were fatal or required euthanasia. Other serious injuries included broken legs, puncture wounds, fractured skulls and paralysis. The report also contended state records cannot account for hundreds of greyhound puppies.

Hardison disputes the Grey2K report, saying greyhounds are raised in large pens on farms with plenty of room to run and play. At racetracks, the dogs reside in heated and air-conditioned kennels and relax on large beds of shredded paper and are regularly allowed outside for exercise, he added. While it is true that some greyhounds are injured during races, the dogs typically run around Iowa's racing ovals about 56,000 times annually with injuries representing only a fraction of 1 percent of the times that dogs run, he said.

"If you compare dog racing to any other athletic activity, the number of injuries are astoundingly low, and greyhounds are doing what they love to do," Hardison said. He challenged the claim on missing puppies, saying puppies are closely monitored by state inspectors.

Iowa is one of only seven states nationally that still have operational dog tracks.

Wisconsin, which once had five greyhound tracks, bade goodbye to its last track in 2009 when Dairyland Greyhound Park in Kenosha was closed after losing \$17 million in its last seven years. Eleven states have made greyhound racing illegal since 1993. The Grey2K report points out that interest in dog racing in Iowa has plunged over the past two decades while interest in casino gambling has soared.

"The momentum is totally on our side. In the 1980s, we were fighting expansion, but now state after state is getting rid of dog racing," said Ann Church, the ASPCA's senior director of government relations.

Carey Theil, Grey2K executive director, said: "It is our hope that when the people of Iowa have the facts, they will look at this industry and say this is something that should not be part of our state."

At Dubuque Greyhound Park, betting on live greyhound racing peaked in 1988, when nearly \$67 million was wagered. By 2009, it fell to less than \$1.7 million, a decline of 97.5 percent. Similarly, at Bluffs Run Greyhound Park in Council Bluffs, greyhound betting peaked at \$123 million wagered in 1987. By 2009, less than \$5 million was wagered, a drop of 96 percent.

A report issued earlier this year by Harrah's Entertainment Inc., which operates Bluffs Run, said the Council Bluffs and Dubuque tracks spend about \$12 million annually in casino profits to subsidize the prize money, or purses, won by dog and kennel owners. Harrah's representatives offered to pay the state's treasury \$7



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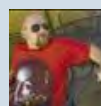
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million annually for the right to end greyhound racing.

Jim Carney, a Des Moines lawyer who represents Harrah's, said Wednesday that Harrah's "will definitely be pursuing the elimination of greyhound racing" during the coming legislative session, although it hasn't finalized its lobbying plans.

Iowa's major party candidates for governor are keeping their options open on the issue.

Republican Terry Branstad "has taken no stand on the greyhound industry during the campaign," said Tim Albrecht, Branstad's spokesman.

Gov. Chet Culver believes any changes to Iowa's gaming laws should be thoroughly reviewed, weighed and discussed, and both sides should have a chance to state their case, said Culver spokesman George Caudill. If the issue arises during the legislative session, "we will weigh in on the legislation after careful study and deliberation," he said.

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