

## Decoupling dog racing a winning bet

OUR VIEW

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Only a government law could force a business to give its customers more of something they clearly want less of.

Welcome to Florida's nonsensical gaming regulation that requires greyhound tracks that operate other forms of gambling on their premises, such as card rooms, to run a minimum number of races each year. Because it's based on a formula, the number can range from 100 performances at one track all the way to 394 at another (a performance consists of at least eight live races).

The problem is that the popularity of dog racing has been in steep decline for several years. Indeed, that's the reason many tracks have added other types of wagering, as alternative sources of revenue.

A 2013 study commissioned by the Legislature found that the amount bet on greyhound racing in Florida fell from nearly \$934 million in 1990 to a little more than \$265 million in 2012, even though the number of races run annually fell only slightly over that period.

Clearly, the public has grown tired of betting on greyhounds, yet the state requires pari-mutuels to keep trotting the dogs out to race whether or not the tracks or their customers want them to — sometimes with dire consequences.

Since Florida began requiring tracks to report dog deaths last year, at least 97 canines have died statewide. Between May 31 and Feb. 17, the Daytona Beach Kennel Club & Poker Room led all tracks with 15 dog deaths.

Although not all the deaths are the result of racing injuries (eight of Daytona Beach's 15 greyhound deaths occurred after the dogs were injured while racing), it makes sense that holding fewer races would result in fewer dogs running and/or running less frequently, which would cut down on the number of injuries and deaths.

That's why an unlikely coalition of track operators and animal welfare advocates who oppose dog racing supports legislation that would decouple mandatory minimum races from poker rooms. The tracks, including the Daytona Beach kennel club, want the flexibility to run races that meet consumer demand and not be forced to devote scarce resources to provide something fewer and fewer people want.

Anti-racing folks, who ideally would like to see the sport disappear altogether, hope decoupling would speed the demise of the industry while getting more dogs out of what activists consider a cruel and inhumane enterprise.

Unfortunately, previous attempts at decoupling have failed, in part because the Florida Greyhound Association and some legislators fear that some tracks will drop racing altogether and become casinos. Concerns about expanding gaming operations are legitimate, but should be a separate issue subject to different regulation. Tying poker to greyhounds makes no logical sense. One doesn't somehow legitimize the other.

The state should not be using the law to perpetuate a business that is proving to be increasingly unpopular and unprofitable. It's time the Legislature finally passed decoupling and stopped forcing greyhound tracks to keep running around in circles.

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