

## Humane gambling legislation

### 'Decouple' dog racing and poker rooms

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Florida legislators could face many difficult decisions about gambling in the annual session that starts March 4.

For instance, should the state end, amend or continue a gaming compact, which expires in 2015, with the Seminole Tribe of Florida?

Should Florida take steps toward allowing full-scale casinos, either statewide or in Broward and Miami-Dade counties? Should slot machines be permitted in Palm Beach, Naples and other places where voters approved them at racetracks?

Or should legislators and the governor take a typical election-year approach and avoid these subjects?

Whatever the case, the Legislature could and should make at least one very easy decision related to gambling: Eliminate the requirement that the owners of racetracks -- such as the Sarasota Kennel Club -- present greyhound racing in order to maintain their licenses to operate poker rooms.

This is a requirement that no one seems to want. Neither the racing industry in Florida nor animal-rights groups publicly supports the mandate and, based on dramatic drops in attendance and betting at tracks, not even gamblers seem to care much about greyhound racing.

Outlawed in 38 states

Commercial dog racing has been outlawed in 38 states and exists in only seven. Of the 21 tracks operating in the United States, 12 are in Florida.

The total regular handle -- the amount bet at pari-mutuels with dog racing -- declined by 72 percent in Florida between 1990 and 2013. During the same period, taxes and fees paid by tracks and collected by the state dropped by 98 percent.

The anti-racing group Grey2kUSA estimates that it costs Florida more to lightly regulate the racing industry than the \$1.8 million in taxes and fees collected.

Consider this: The owners of Sarasota's track have contended that they cannot afford to buy all-metal cages, mandated by state law, for greyhounds; what's more, they said last year, the demand for those cages is so low that few are manufactured. The SKC's owners sought, and obtained, a waiver from the rules. As a result, many dogs are kept in wooden crates; that's just wrong.



*HERALD-TRIBUNE ARCHIVE / CHIP LITHERLAND / 2009*

Greyhounds go airborne as they chase a mechanical rabbit, in foreground, around the track at the Sarasota Kennel Club. The Legislature may consider a proposal to eliminate the requirement that racetrack owners present dog racing in order to maintain licenses to operate poker rooms.

## Concerns about treatment

Other concerns about the treatment and safety of greyhounds abound. A greyhound was electrocuted in Sarasota last year while chasing the mechanical rabbit used during races. Florida newspapers have reported evidence that dogs have been drugged -- with cocaine, for example. And there have long been questions about the conditions under which dogs are kept and "retired."

Last year, "decoupling" bills tied to greyhound racing and card rooms were filed in the Florida House of Representatives and Senate. The bills would have eliminated the racing requirement to maintain card rooms. Unfortunately, the bills didn't pass.

There are some signs that a decoupling provision could be part of a larger, broader revision of Florida's gambling laws this year. Good.

So long as gambling at dog tracks is not expanded, we urge legislators -- especially those from our region -- to support decoupling. Requiring facilities to offer racing that the public no longer supports doesn't make sense. Eliminating the requirement won't hurt anyone, but it will help greyhounds avoid a fate they don't deserve.

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