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Mass. voters approve dog racing ban

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(David Kamerman/Globe Staff)

Christine Dorchak, president of Grey2K USA, a greyhound advocacy group, cheered with Kathy Estridge, Leslie Scheideler, and Tracy Casner, during a party for supporters of the dog racing ban at a Boston nightclub.

By Stephanie Ebbert, Globe Staff

Massachusetts voters today embraced a ballot question to end greyhound racing in the state, rejecting track owners' arguments that the ban would cost jobs at a time of economic hardship in favor of protecting dogs from harm.

The contentious ballot question passed amid emotional ad campaigns by both sides. Proponents used images of sad-eyed greyhounds that they say are caged inhumanely and raced to injury while opponents put the spotlight on the track employees who would be put out of work if the ballot question passed.

"It's not fair to the dogs," said Dulce Fajardo, 41, a Roxbury Democrat who voted for the ballot question. "I love animals. And for me this is something cruel. They can't defend themselves so we have to do it for them."

The Associated Press called the outcome shortly after 10 p.m.

The Committee to Protect Dogs argued that racing dogs are treated inhumanely -- kept in cages for most of the day and often injured when they are forced to run for sport. The campaign relied upon data kept by the State Racing Commission since mid-2002 showing injuries to more than 800 greyhounds.

The committee -- formed by Grey2K USA, the Humane Society of the United States, and the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals-Angell Medical Center -- spent an estimated \$500,000 through Oct. 15, the most recent reporting deadline, campaign finance reports show, and received about \$144,000 in in-kind contributions. Activists estimated they had 500 volunteers at the polls today, some of them with their own greyhounds by their sides.

"We had an overwhelmingly positive response, my dog and I," said Christine Dorchak, the co-chair of the committee who worked the polls with her dog, Zoe. "We're optimistic that this will, in fact, be the year of the greyhound."

The Massachusetts Animal Interest Coalition -- funded by the Raynham-Taunton Greyhound Park -- launched an emotional counter-campaign arguing that the employees of the state's two dog tracks had done nothing wrong. Instead, the track workers said, they have been following the regulations as handed down by the State Racing Commission after the last ballot question failed. (They note that the injuries they must report to the commission include minor ones.) The coalition argued that the ballot question would put the needs of dogs before the needs of people -- among them, some 1,000 employees of the state's two dog tracks who would lose their jobs.

This time, the ballot question proposed to phase out racing by 2010, leaving workers time to find alternative jobs. But the track and kennel owners fighting the initiative were unmoved by that gesture, saying that a ban on racing would still eliminate jobs and tax revenue at a time when both are sorely needed.

"The real question here is an economic one," said Glenn Totten, a consultant working with the coalition to fight the ballot question. "I don't think things are any better in Worcester or Springfield or Pittsfield in 2008 in comparison to where they were in 2000."

The opposition relied entirely on in-kind contributions from the Raynham-Taunton track of little over \$206,000 through the Oct. 15 reporting deadline, and spent about \$400,000 since then on broadcast advertising. The campaign was getting help at the polls from union forces, including the electrical workers, carpenters, police, and Teamsters unions.