Gaming bill to include decoupling, injury reports; no decision on slots

By MATTHEW BEATON / The News Herald
Published: Monday, February 3, 2014 at 19:00 PM.

TALLAHASSEE — The Florida Legislature's comprehensive gambling legislation this year will include eliminating the minimum number of required races for horse and dog tracks, lawmakers said Monday.

The practice, known as decoupling, will get a high profile change in the bill, the result of a lobbying surge from tracks and animal advocates on the issue that has bounced around Tallahassee for years. Tracks currently must run a certain number of races each year in order to operate the more-profitable card rooms.

State Senate Gaming Committee Chairman Garrett Richter, R-Naples, announced the proposed committee bill's core components at the panel's Monday meeting. The bill's draft text will be unveiled Feb. 10, prior to the committee's next meeting.

The bill also will include an injury-reporting requirement at dog and horse tracks, something for which animal advocates have pushed.

Noticeably omitted, though, is a decision on slot machines. Washington and Gadsden counties have approved slot machines through local referendum, but the state attorney general blocked the counties from activating those machines.

In Monday's meeting, Richter pushed for decoupling tracks immediately, saying he believed the state should no longer tell the dog and horse tracks how to run their businesses. In recent years, interest in dog tracks has taken a precipitous decline, to the point where all tracks in the state are losing money.

Ebro Greyhound Park, just north of Bay County, lost $2.9 million on greyhound racing in 2012. Even its card room profits weren't enough to put it in the black, as the track lost $1 million overall that year.

State Sen. Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater, said decoupling is not a "black and white issue." He said breeders and trainers make their living based on these races and through decoupling the state Legislature would be picking winners and losers.

At the end of the meeting, it remained unclear whether the decoupling portion of the bill would be written prior to the legislation's unveiling. Richter said he would consult with staff.

"We'll either develop it on the fly or pick it apart when we get it," he said.

State Sen. Bill Montford, D-Tallahassee, whose district includes several Panhandle counties, though not Washington, stayed silent during the discussion.

Gaming commission

The proposed bill also would create a state gaming commission, which appears to have unanimous support from the gaming committee.

Latvala wholeheartedly endorsed the idea. He said in other states the gaming industry fears the gaming commission. "I think that's what we need here," he said.

Senators expressed concern, however, over how members would be picked for the commission, which was compared to the state's Public Service Commission (PSC), a board that oversees utilities in Florida.

Latvala said he didn't like comparisons to the PSC, which at times has cozied up to industry interests. He said he doesn't want a gambling commission to be the industry's "lap dog."

Richter endorsed the idea of full-time board members being paid at the PSC rate of about $130,000 annually.

The commission would oversee all gaming in the state, except the Florida Lottery, which didn't appeal to Senate President designate Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando.

Gardiner said the Lottery is gambling and it would be worth including under a commission's purview, particularly based on what he described as past problems, although he didn't elaborate. "I wouldn't shut the door on it yet," Gardiner said.

The bill also would:

l Authorize the governor to move forward and renegotiate the existing Seminole Compact for high-stakes table games.

l Open the door for destination casinos in Miami-Dade and Broward counties. Richter made it clear destination-casino licenses wouldn't be handed out to everyone, but he suggested these two locales may qualify as exceptions and openly endorsed putting a casino in Miami.