

Betting on decoupling

By

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When it comes to remaking state gambling laws, it appears the Florida Legislature is going to play it safe this year and not roll the dice on more casinos.

There's a good bet, though, that lawmakers finally will give pari-mutuels more freedom on how to schedule their operations.

The Senate Gaming Committee on Monday unveiled the outline of a comprehensive gaming bill that falls short of the sweeping reforms that have been discussed in recent years, and that many had anticipated would be at the forefront of the 2014 session. Noticeably absent is an attempt to expand Las Vegas casino-style gambling around the state; instead, the measure would limit expansion to just two resorts in South Florida. Currently, the state licenses such gaming only at sites operated by the Seminole Tribe.

Nor does the bill address allowing slot machines in Washington and Gadsden Counties, where Attorney General Pam Bondi has blocked voter-approved referenda permitting the games. That's disappointing.

The bill reflects the disinterest House Speaker Will Weatherford and Senate President Don Gaetz recently expressed in tackling the larger gambling issues this year. The Legislature last year commissioned a study of gaming in preparation of debating whether to allow more casino-style resorts around the state. Big-money gambling interests have been preparing the battlefield in recent years for a legislative showdown.

Gaetz, though, says a decision doesn't have to be made this year, and Weatherford has said he doesn't want the House to consider an expansion of gambling unless it is accompanied by a constitutional amendment asking voters if they want to have a say in future expansions.

It's good to see the Senate bill tackle one issue that's been festering for too long: Eliminating the requirement that the owners of racetracks present a minimum number of greyhound races annually in order to maintain their licenses to operate poker rooms, aka "decoupling."

Betting on dog races has been declining for years, so tracks have supplanted some of that lost revenue by offering other forms of gambling, such as poker rooms. But state law requires greyhound tracks to conduct a minimum number of races each year if they also have other forms of gaming. That can range from 100 performances all the way to 394; Ebro Greyhound Park in Washington County requires a minimum of 167 (a performance consists of at least eight live races).

Why be forced to offer the public something it doesn't want? Pari-mutuels don't like the law because they lose money on the races. Animal-rights activists dislike it because it means more dogs are required to run.

At Monday's committee hearing, Sen. Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater, expressed reservations about decoupling, saying it's not a "black and white issue." He said breeders and trainers make their living based on these races, and decoupling would mean the state is picking winners and losers.

On the contrary, the current law is propping up breeders and trainers by mandating an arbitrary number of races when the market cannot sustain them. Decoupling would let tracks, not government, decide how many races to run.

Decoupling doesn't have the political sizzle that more casinos would, but it's a common-sense deregulatory effort whose time has come. If the Legislature makes one change to gaming laws this year, it should pass decoupling.

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