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04/27/2011

by David Roysse
The News Service of Florida

Greyhound dog tracks, which say they have been losing money on dog racing and can make more from poker rooms anyway, would be allowed to continue to offer gambling without having to hold live dog racing under a bill that passed in the House on Tuesday.

The measure, sponsored by Rep. Dana Young (R-Tampa), is opposed by dog breeders, who say it will put thousands of them, along with track workers, out of work.

But the main opposition in the House has come from a number of Young's fellow Republicans who say it will lead to an expansion of gambling at the tracks, which will, they say, increase their poker, and casino-like offerings once freed of the burden of hosting live dog racing.

The measure (HB 1145), which passed the House 86-31, now goes to the Senate.

The state currently requires dog tracks to hold races if they want to keep their card rooms open. That doesn't make sense, Young said, because it forces businesses to continue to take part in a money-losing business.

"It will eliminate an artificial propping up of an industry," said Young. She said tax revenues collected from dog tracks have declined 96 percent in the past decade.

The measure is one of the few to openly split the ruling Republicans in the Legislature, between an anti-gambling faction and those who say gambling is here to stay and that the measure is pro-business.

"All you're doing is converting race tracks to card room casinos," said Rep. Dennis Baxley (R-Ocala), who voted against the bill. "When you reduce racing, you increase gambling."

Young disputed the idea that it would expand gambling. Backers noted that the card rooms are already up and running at most of the tracks, and gamblers are already choosing that gaming option over playing the dogs.

The bill is also pushed heavily by animal rights activists, who argue that, at a minimum, racing is not the best way for dogs to spend their lives, and most are retired after a couple years.

Some backers of the bill say some of those dogs don't find adoptive homes and have to be euthanized, though the greyhound industry says the people involved in racing treat the animals well.

Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fort Walton Beach) was one of the few lawmakers to argue the animal welfare point, though.

"We're essentially becoming partners in the abuse of these innocent animals for no reason," said Gaetz.

But most of the opponents said they were against the bill because it would simply shift the tracks to casinos.

Backers, however, argued that the shift of Florida to a gambling state has already happened. Rep. Mike Weinstein (R-Jacksonville) noted the biggest provider of gambling opportunity was the state itself, because of the Lottery, and said it was hypocritical to block others from making money on gaming.

"It's something that's here and it's here to stay," said Rep. Eddie Gonzalez (R-Hialeah). "And we should hopefully get more tax dollars from it."

With most of the day on the House floor taken up with debate on abortion bills and measures related to gun rights, Democrats had spent much of the debate time asking Republicans about the need to create jobs and how the social measures would help fix the economy.

On the greyhound bill, Democrats had a different twist to the jobs question.

"How many of those greyhound dogs are going to lose their jobs?" asked Rep. Dwayne Taylor (D-Daytona Beach).

"These dogs will be given work force training for their new jobs as family pets," replied Young.



Weinstein

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