

Senate passes bill on greyhound racing

By RYAN MILLS

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TALLAHASSEE — Legislation that would end a state mandate coupling greyhound racing and card room gambling is one step closer to becoming law.

On Friday afternoon, the Florida Senate voted 25 to 14 to approve its version of a bill that would allow greyhound tracks to cut down the number of races they offer — or end racing all together — and still run their highly-profitable card rooms.

“We have an industry here that is dying,” said the bill’s sponsor, Sen. Maria Sachs, D-Delray Beach. “It is the dog racing industry. It is a business model that has seen its day.”

The House passed its version of the bill earlier in the week, but there are some differences between the two bills regarding tax credits. If the House passes the Senate version as is, it will go to Gov. Rick Scott’s desk.

In 1996, the state authorized card rooms at greyhound tracks. To continue their card rooms, every year the tracks are currently required to conduct at least 90 percent of the performances that they conducted the year they applied for their initial card room license.

But over the last decade, greyhound wagering has taken a dive.

The legislation would decouple card rooms and slot machines from greyhound racing, leaving the fate of Florida’s greyhound racing industry to the market.

“If a track wants to race, this bill allows them to race,” Sachs said. “It doesn’t stop anybody from racing. It just says that the citizens of this state will not pay them to continue to race anymore.”

The vote was applauded by both track owners and animal rights group — an unlikely pairing.

However, greyhound kennel owners, breeders and trainers said the bill would decimate their industry.

“We’re coming out of the worst recession in the history of the country.

Tell me another business that is doing the same amount of money they were doing five years ago,” said John Weber, a greyhound owner from Collier County who was

lobbying at the Capitol Friday. “There is nobody.”

If the bill is signed into law, Southwest Floridians can expect to see fewer races at the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track. Currently the track runs about 400 performances a year, by state mandate. Izzy Havenick, the vice president of Southwest Florida Enterprises, which owns the Bonita-based track, would like to cut it back to 100 to 150.

“We believe in the free market system for businesses, and we believe we should be allowed to run our business by demand, not by mandate,” he said.

There was drama on the Senate floor before the vote, as a handful of Senators attempted to significantly change the bill with late-filed amendments. Senate President Mike Haridopolous stopped debate, and ordered everyone involved to work things out before debate was continued.

Ultimately, the amendments were not voted on. Haridopolos caught some flack regarding the procedures, but he defended himself.

“This has been the most open Senate, with multiple committee hearings for every individual who wanted it. Let’s be clear about that,” Haridopolos said. “Today we’re going to vote on this so we can focus on other issues.”

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