

Decouple dogs, cards

By

Published: Wednesday, August 21, 2013 at 08:00 AM.

Officials announced Tuesday that the Florida Senate will host a series of four public hearings this fall to seek public input on the future of gambling in the state. They will be in conjunction with the release of the second part of an outside study commissioned by the Legislature to examine the impact of gaming.

That's the prelude to what is expected to be the blockbuster issue in the 2014 legislative session: whether to expand casino gambling.

However, lawmakers also should clean up some obstacles and inconsistencies in the regulation of already established gaming operations — many of which could use a lifeline.

As reported by The News Herald's Matthew Beaton, revenue from betting on live greyhound races at the track in Ebro fell 70 percent the last seven years. That includes a drop of 9.6 percent last year. Ebro is not alone — live greyhound betting revenue in Florida fell by 5.8 percent last year.

Thoroughbred racing has suffered an even steeper decline, and jai-alai has all but disappeared.

Ebro and other pari-mutuels have supplanted some of that lost racing 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's required minimum is 167 (a performance consists of at least eight live races).

In most cases, that's too many races chasing too few customers. Why should tracks go to the expense of providing a product that a declining number of people want to buy?

For that matter, why should dogs be forced to run for little profit?

That's the hook that has made allies out of opponents. Groups such as GREY2K USA that oppose greyhound racing on animal welfare grounds — they believe the dogs are treated cruelly and exploited — would welcome a reduction in races (and eventually their elimination). Although track owners such as Ebro's Stocky Hess defend their treatment of the dogs, they also support having the freedom to hold as few races as they want.

Dog racing may not completely disappear, but the tracks' economic future clearly lies in expanding into other forms of gambling. That is harder to do when the state binds their hands on race days.

Tying poker to greyhounds makes no logical sense. One doesn't burnish the credentials of the other. Previous attempts to pass legislation decoupling the two forms of gaming have failed. But with momentum building to craft comprehensive gaming reform in Florida next year, the time is ripe to finally get over the hump and give the racing industry — and its opponents — what they want.

Once that happens, lawmakers can address efforts by Ebro and others to expand into other forms of casino gambling.