

Melbourne Greyhound Park, Club 52 want to 'de-couple' racing, gambling

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The money flowing through Melbourne Greyhound Park and Club 52 as a result of live dog races fell nearly 30 percent in the past year.

And some — including the track's general manager, Pat Biddix — see that as a positive. Biddix and many of his colleagues across the state would rather not have to offer live dog racing at their venues, but rather focus on generating revenues through poker rooms and, someday, slot machines.

They're hoping these latest figures, along with support by greyhound support organizations, will convince lawmakers that it's wrong to link, or "couple," dog racing with other forms of gambling. That coupling has been in practice since 1996.

"You couldn't be more right," Biddix said. "We're going to push this issue and, hopefully, make it happen."

All across Florida, tracks like Melbourne Greyhound Park are facing steep revenue losses from their dog racing operations — an offering required by the state of Florida if they want to continue to operate poker rooms, which is the real draw.

A recently released state report shows that the amount bet on live greyhound races dropped at 11 of 13 active dog tracks (The Tampa Greyhound Track is an off-track betting parlor and its "live races" actually occur at Derby Lane in St. Petersburg).

In Melbourne, revenues from live greyhound races fell more than 28 percent, to \$116,456 from \$162,138. That percentage drop was the second highest in Florida. Only the Jefferson County Kennel Club in Monticello had a higher percentage drop in revenues, 65.3 percent, over the year.

In all, Florida's 13 greyhound tracks are losing a combined \$35 million a year on dog races, said a report recently released by New Jersey-based Spectrum Gaming, a consulting firm hired by the state to look at the potential for expanding gambling operations in Florida.

Pari-mutuels rely on their poker rooms to stay afloat, the report said.

Dog racing opponents argue the study provides further evidence legislators should eliminate greyhound racing when a special Senate gambling committee studies Florida gambling next year.

State records show pari-mutuel receipts at Melbourne Greyhound fell to \$141,729 from \$918,213 between 2006 and the last fiscal year — an 84 percent decline.

At the same time card room revenues at the park rose to \$4.4 million from \$3.8 million in that period.

“Nobody bets on dog racing,” said Biddix, adding that only a handful of people ever show up to watch live dog races.

“And we gave up trying to promote it,” he said. “It’s a product that’s old.”

Horses, by far, are more popular in simulcast pari-mutuel wagering, Biddix said.

“Melbourne is right, they’re not making money off of it,” said Dennis Tyler, of Greyhound Pets of America of Central Florida Inc.

Tyler and Biddix have formed a partnership of sorts. Biddix provides Tyler’s organization kennel space as it goes about finding foster homes for former racing greyhounds. Tyler’s group, he said, has found homes for 7,600 greyhounds during the past 17 years.

Tyler won’t take a position on greyhousing racing saying he and his organization are “race neutral.” His mission is to find good homes for greyhounds once they’re done with the tracks. While they are competing, Tyler said caring for dogs during race season — boarding, feeding and medical expenses — run as high as a \$1,000 a week.

“It’s very expensive,” Tyler said.

Naples-Fort Myers track owner Izzy Havenick wants legislators to reduce, if not eliminate, the number of state-mandated dog races and allow him to install slot machines Lee County voters approved last year.

Brevard County voters, by a sizable margin, also approved slots in 2012.

“Overall, my company is losing money,” said Havenick, whose poker room doubled its gross receipts in the past six years from \$3.2 million in 2006 to \$6.4 million in 2012.

“We don’t want to lay people off, so we’re trying to figure out how to deal with the losses until the Legislature acts,” Havenick said.

Spectrum’s study doesn’t make policy recommendations, only lays out gaming’s economic effects and social costs. The Senate Gaming Committee plans to hold public meetings before possibly releasing a gambling bill during the 2014 legislative session, Richter said.

“Revenues tell a story and the whole pari-mutuel industry has been on the decline,” Richter said. “It’s not just dogs. It’s jai alai and horse racing. We’ll investigate whether or not to consider expanding gambling. If we do, we will need to understand and give consideration on how we will regulate it.”

The amount wagered for Florida’s 13 greyhound facilities was \$933.8 million in fiscal year 1989-90, dropping to \$265.4 million in fiscal year 2011-12, according to the study. That’s a 67 percent decrease. Poker rooms, meanwhile, brought in \$91.3 million statewide in 2011-12 compared to \$36.6 million in 2005-06.

The live-racing mandate was established in 1996 when the state authorized card rooms at

greyhound tracks. To continue their card rooms, the tracks are required to conduct at least 90 percent of the performances they did in 1996 when they applied for their initial card room license.

Grey2K USA, a nonprofit group focused on ending greyhound racing, hopes Spectrum's study inspires legislators to eliminate the inhumane sport.

"Florida greyhound tracks have already become profitable poker rooms that happen to have dogs running around in circles while no one watches," Grey2K founder Carey Theil said. "The only question left is how many dogs must suffer before lawmakers change this flawed policy."

Rep. Matt Caldwell, R-Lehigh Acres, said he's looking forward to discussing the future of dog racing and gambling in the Legislature next year.

"I believe the decision should be left to the voters," Caldwell said. "Voters have expressed their will historically to maintain the privileges for those tracks to race. About 20 years ago, we approved those tracks to get poker rooms to sustain their economics. A lot of things have changed since then."

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