

# Greyhound advocates seek residents' support with decoupling bill

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INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — Of the 21 greyhound racing tracks left in the United States, 12 are located in Florida, all are losing money, and many track owners want out of the business.

But in order for the money sucking tracks to fade out for good, it will take the State House and Senate agreeing on a bill that will officially untie the tracks from profitable poker rooms and rescue thousands of dogs who advocates say, are living as hostages.

The bill that animal advocates and a majority of track owners are vying for is called the “decoupling” bill, and it is set to see the House floor in the spring of 2015.

As the law stands, establishments with greyhound racing tracks are permitted to also operate card rooms and simulcasting. But if an establishment nixes dog racing, it also loses its privilege to operate the profitable part of its gambling business – namely poker rooms, according to Carey Theil, executive director for Grey2KUSA.

Grey2KUSA is a non-profit organization based out of Massachusetts that began as a grassroots effort to end what it considers the inhumane treatment of greyhounds in its home state. While it took years for the organization to see success in Massachusetts, it expanded nationally and globally, becoming a voice for the otherwise voiceless greyhounds across the world.

But how bad can life be for these racing hounds?

According to Theil, 8,000 dogs in the state of Florida are kept approximately 22 hours per day in cages too small to even turn around in. They are fed “4D” meat, the bits and pieces of dead, deceased or dying animals that are deemed unfit for human consumption. And they spend their short lives at great risk for serious injury and often die before their third or fourth birthday.

Further, Theil said female greyhounds are often given low doses of steroids to keep them from going into heat, while still others spend their lives for no other purpose than to keep breeding.

In the state of Florida, Theil said, one greyhound dies every three days. Just over two weeks ago, a dog named Magic Grunt suffered a broken back after a fall out during a race, became paralyzed and



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Midi, a greyhound that raced at the Melbourne Greyhound Park, now lives with her adopted family.

had to wait several hours before being put down. A version of Magic Grunt's story is one that seems to repeat more than 100 times per year in this state.

Not all advocates for the decoupling bill are shelter volunteers and puppy lovers, some of them are in the business.

"We lose money on live racing. It would actually improve my bottom line if we stopped racing," said Pat Biddix, partner and general manager of the Melbourne Greyhound Park.

Biddix is in favor of the decoupling bill because he wishes to keep and grow his business with profitable forms of gambling without putting dogs on the track. To make sure his opinions are heard, he is meeting with Governor Rick Scott at the end of this week.

"The truth of the matter is it's time to quit racing dogs. What we're doing is a little bit barbaric, we know that," Biddix said. "For us, decoupling means stop running a business that has been losing money for about 11 years. That's not right. We should have the right to get out of it."

Biddix' Melbourne track has the largest recorded loss for greyhound racing in the state, but his competitors are not far behind.

According the Spectrum Report, an independent study funded by the Florida legislature and released in Oct. of 2013, the state spent \$4.1 million in 2012 to regulate greyhound racing. The total tax revenue collected from greyhound racing was only \$3.1 million – a \$1 million deficit.

The problem is, decoupling has gone before the House and Senate before, and on two separate occasions, died because legislators could not agree on minor details that have all to do with gambling, and nothing to do with dogs, Theil said.

"Anything in Tallahassee that has to do with gambling gets irrational very quickly," Theil said during a presentation he gave at the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County on Tuesday evening.

The definition of irrational in this case, Theil said, is not separating the issue of the inhumane treatment of animals from the hot topic of gambling policies across the state.

Coming from two very different sides of the issue, Theil and Biddix both agree the best way to keep the decoupling bill from falling on deaf ears is for the public to speak up.

"Find out who your legislator is and call them and write them," Theil said.

"Animals need laws to protect them," said Kate MacFall, state director for the Humane Society of the United States. MacFall joined Theil in Vero Beach on Tuesday evening to urge local supporters to take action on this bill. "If we don't speak for the animals, we really are letting them down.

MacFall also put supporters on alert to look out for the official time and date information on the

Humane Lobby Day that will take place in March of next year.

“I think decoupling will eventually end greyhound racing in Florida,” Theil said. He added, decoupling is only one step in a long line of steps that need to be taken for greyhounds to see the end of racing forever, but it’s a big step.

Anyone interested in reaching out to legislators can contact the Humane Society of Vero Beach for guidance and a script to make the phone calls go more smoothly.