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EDITORIAL

Give the dogs a break

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By TBO.COM | Tbo.com
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One of the disappointments of the Florida Legislature's last session was the failure to adopt a common-sense bill to reduce the number of greyhound races.

The races, which critics say are inhumane, have become increasingly unpopular. Yet state law requires a dog track to run at least 100 live races a year to keep its license for a casino or card room.

Legislation proposed by Tampa Republican state Rep. Dana Young would have "decoupled" the racing requirement from the gambling license. Passage of the measure seemed assured until the waning days of the Legislature, when it got caught in some Senate-House wrangling.

Young is again pushing the measure. This time it should be adopted.

Dog tracks support the measure. So do animal-protection groups, particularly the greyhound-support organization Grey2K USA, whose members object to racing practices they say force the animals to be kept confined at least 20 hours a day, with dogs in cages where they cannot stand erect. They say dog injuries are common at the tracks.

Dog trainers and owners say the dogs are treated well, but it is disturbing that Florida does not require greyhound tracks to report injuries to the public.

In any event, Young's legislation is not aimed at eliminating races or toughening track oversight. It would allow Florida's 13 tracks to drop races if there is no demand for them.

It appears some tracks are running races solely to ensure they can continue their other gambling operations. Between 2004 and 2010, the amount wagered on live dog racing dropped by 35 percent, and attendance dropped by 69 percent.

Clearly, the public is sending a signal. An exemption allowed Tampa's track, which offers card games, to stop races in 2007. It technically transferred its races to Derby Lane in St. Petersburg.



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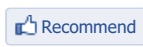

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Cutting the races also will cut public costs. Between 2004 and 2011, tax revenue from greyhound racing in Florida fell 72 percent. It no longer even covers the costs of regulatory oversight. According to estimates from the Florida Department of Business Regulation, Young's proposal could save the state about \$471,000.

Young's bill would allow the tracks to conduct gambling without holding races. But, importantly, it would not expand gambling. Tracks simply could continue conducting the same games they do now without holding any races.

As Young says, the racing requirement is creating an artificial market for greyhound breeders. "It's another example of government being overly involved where it shouldn't be," she says. "There is no reason for government to prop up an industry that is dying in the marketplace. ... Let it succeed or fail on its own."

Young is right. This time, lawmakers should ensure the greyhound racing bill makes it across the finish line.

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