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Iowa House panel OKs bill to end greyhound racing at Council Bluffs, Dubuque tracks

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An Iowa House subcommittee approved a bill today that would allow casinos in Dubuque and Council Bluffs to end dog racing – a sport that initially boomed in Iowa after it was established in the mid-1980s, but has waned over the past two decades.

The proposal, House Study Bill 208, now heads to the Iowa House State Government Committee, where it faces an uncertain future with Democrats and Republicans on both sides of the issue. A companion measure is pending in the Iowa Senate that would require the casinos to pay a total of \$70 million to the state treasury over a seven-year period in exchange for the right to end dog racing.

Betting on dog racing was established in Iowa in the mid-1980s with the goal of creating jobs and helping Iowa farmers. The state's greyhound tracks initially experienced strong attendance and wagering, but interest plunged after riverboat gambling was launched in

William Petroski



Bill Petroski is a senior reporter with the Des Moines Register.

1991 and it has continued to decline ever since.

The state's two remaining dog tracks only continue to operate because they are heavily subsidized by gambling profits from Horseshoe Casino in Council Bluffs and Mystique Casino in Dubuque.

At Bluffs Run dog track in Council Bluffs, a total of \$66.8 million was wagered on live dog races in 1991, but that figure totaled only \$4.3 million in 2010, according to the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission. At Dubuque Greyhound Park, wagering on live dog races totaled \$28.1 million in 1991 and it dropped to \$1.6 million in 2010.

State Rep. Kevin Koester, R-Ankeny, who chaired the three-member panel that approved the bill today on a unanimous vote, said it's clear that it's not a matter of whether dog racing will end in Iowa, but when it will end. Similar legislation was considered by lawmakers last year, but failed to win approval.

"The reality would be that it is a bad business plan to subsidize something that has no long-term future. I respect people with the view that the agriculture impact of the dog farms is worth subsidizing and worth continuing. I just don't agree with that," Koester said.

The other two committee members who supported the bill included state Reps. Renee Schulte, R-Cedar Rapids, and Vicki Lensing, D-Iowa City.

Jim Carney, a lobbyist for Las Vegas-based Caesars Entertainment Inc., which operates Bluffs Run greyhound track in Council Bluffs, told lawmakers today that dog racing is "dead" in Iowa and that dog tracks are closing throughout the country. Only seven states still have dog racing, he said.

Carney handed out photographs showing empty stands at Bluffs Run. He said that while the facility can seat more than 2,000 people only about 30 to 40 people typically attend racing performances, which are offered year-round. Dog racing only exists in Iowa because of the casino subsidies, he added.

Don Avenson, a lobbyist for the Iowa Greyhound Association, argued against ending dog racing. He said the economic development model for Iowa's racing industry that was developed in the 1980s still works, supporting 1,000 jobs related to greyhound racing and supporting 58 Iowa farms.

High school and college students earn money leading dogs at Bluffs Run, and work is created for Iowa veterinary services by the tracks, Avenson said. He added that by ending dog racing lawmakers would be eliminating jobs at a time when Gov. Terry Branstad has made a commitment to create 200,000 new jobs in Iowa.

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Avenson also complained that Bluffs Run has made little effort to make the facility attractive to gamblers. He said the business looks unkempt and that it isn't as accessible or as alluring as the adjacent Horseshoe Casino – a charge that a Caesars lobbyist strongly denied.

State Rep. Brian Moore, R-Zwingle, spoke against the bill, saying dog racing supports rural Iowa communities and that people associated with the industry buy locally.

“I think this business should survive,” Moore said.

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