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Senate shoots down delay on racing ban

Local lawmakers still hoping that gambling will breathe life into dog tracks

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By **Tim Faulkner, Staff Writer**

GateHouse News Service

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Raynham — The votes don't seem to be favoring the local dog track and neither does the economy, but signs of hope are emerging that Raynham-Taunton Greyhound Park — and the state's three other racetracks — will be given a chance to boost lagging business through gambling.

State Sen. Marc Pacheco, D- Taunton, said he was disappointed that the two track-related budget amendments he sponsored were rejected by the state Senate Thursday, but he was encouraged to hear that other members of the Senate wanted to take a closer look at gambling and the dog racing ban after

the new budget is completed.

“There seems to be willingness on some of the members to go in that direction,” Pacheco said. Pacheco was one of four senators who sponsored a losing budget amendment that proposed selling gambling licenses for the right to install 2,500 slot machines at the tracks or at new “destination” casinos.

By a vote of 29-8, the state Senate also denied Pacheco's amendment to delay the greyhound dog racing ban by two years until Jan. 1, 2012.

The two defeats were hardly seen as a setback by George Carney, owner of Raynham-Taunton Greyhound Park. “That doesn't trouble me a bit. We're still very much alive,” he said.

Lawmakers, he maintained, can't ignore 600 jobs in the midst of a severe recession. Despite an 18 percent decline at the two racing tracks this year and a 28 percent decline between 2006 and 2008, Carney said he's not giving up on dog racing and remains optimistic that some form of a “racino” bill will prevail in Raynham.

“We've got the best location in the state of Massachusetts for slots machines,” he said.

But time is running out for a reprieve from the Greyhound Protection Act, which voters approved last November and takes effect Jan. 1, 2010.

Raynham residents took action Monday night by passing a home rule petition during their town meeting at the middle school, an initiative that may prompt a vote on the racing ban from the Legislature.

A separate bill seeking the same two-year delay was also filed by Pacheco in January.

Pacheco and Rep. David Flynn, D-Bridgewater, signed on as sponsors of a bill that proposes gaming at the racetracks in Revere, Plainville, Raynham and East Boston.

The latest gambling push couldn't be coming at a better time. Business is off at the state's two greyhound racetracks and Twin River, a greyhound track in Rhode Island, is ending racing this fall due to revenue shortfalls.

“Dog racing is in such sharp decline, it’s unclear how long the jobs will last anyway,” said Christine Dorchak of The Committee to Protect Dogs, the group that advocated for the greyhound racing ban in Massachusetts.

She said her organization is doing all it can to help track employees receive job training and job placement assistance. But, she said, Thursday’s defeat of a delay on the dog racing ban was a win for democracy. “It sends a clear message that the will of the people supercedes anything else.”

tfaulkner@tauntongazette.com

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