

Posted by Mary Ellen Klas on Friday, Oct. 23, 2015 at 8:27 AM

Animal advocates say they are going to take greyhound fight directly to voters



Stymied for years by broken promises and the tangled politics of gaming in Florida, a coalition of animal advocates announced Friday that it is forming a political committee to pass ballot initiatives that reform and phase out greyhound racing in the state.

The “Committee to Protect Dogs” includes representatives from local animal rights organizations from across the state, and Sen. **Eleanor Sobel**, a Hollywood Democrat.

“Every initiative option is on the table, including a statewide constitutional amendment to prohibit dog racing,” said **Anjali Sareen** of Altamonte Springs, who is chairing the group.

The group’s goal is to push for county-based initiatives to require greyhound injury reporting, stop feeding dogs diseased meat, prohibit the use of anabolic steroids in female greyhounds, and improve housing conditions for race dogs.

“Thousands of greyhounds endure lives of confinement at these facilities, kept in small cages that are barely large enough for them to stand up or turn around,” Sareen said in a statement. “This industry is cruel and inhumane, and only exists today because of a government mandate that forces gambling facilities to race dogs.”

Florida’s dog racing schedule is tethered to a 1997 law that allowed track owners to operate poker rooms only if they operate 90 percent of the races they held in that year. Animal activists say it forces tracks to run more races than is healthy for dogs.

They have been working for years to get passage of the so-call "decoupling" bill that would allow tracks to reduce their racing schedule and, ultimately, end dog racing.

Most track owners support the move, hoping to end live racing and replacing it with more lucrative card rooms and slot machines.

But dog owners, trainers, and track employees have vigorously pushed back, and efforts to revise the law die every legislative session. Leading the pack has been the owners of the Palm Beach County Kennel Club, which fear that by passing decoupling they will lose their leverage with the Legislature to allow for slot machine gambling at their facility. Palm Beach and Lee county residents have approved local referendums authorizing slots.

The Florida Greyhound Association, which represents owners, trainers and breeders, argues that greyhound racing track owners have contributed billions in revenue to Florida's economy since the sport was legalized and contribute hundreds of jobs. They say their state-created monopoly would lose its ability to compete if tracks aren’t required to race dogs.

“This has nothing to do with the protection of dogs; it’s a phony front organization for track owners that want to become slot casinos,” said **Jack Cory**, lobbyist for the greyhound association. “If the people of Florida want to have slot casinos across the state they should pass a statewide referendum. The tracks already can improve the safety of dogs.”

The organization has repeatedly pushed for a three-pronged safety plan that includes improving racing conditions for dogs but legislators have also failed to adopt that.

Decoupling bills have passed legislative committees nine times, Sareen said and “never lost a committee vote.” Both the full House and full Senate have also passed the bill, in separate years, and a requirement for greyhound injury reporting has passed the Senate twice – both times with unanimous votes, she said.

“Despite these victories, so far we have been unable to send a bill to the governor’s desk,” Sareen said. “Each year, our efforts to help greyhounds have been stymied by other gambling issues unrelated to the welfare of dogs.”

The group’s ultimate goal is to phase out greyhound racing in Florida, Sareen said, and while they will continue to try to pass legislation they have also concluded “the time has come to take our case directly to the voters.”

“Greyhound racing is an issue that people feel strongly about,” she said. “People care about dogs and greyhound racing is a dying industry.”

There are only 21 dog tracks left in the United States as the popularity of the sport has plummeted, and 12 of them are in Florida.

Since its legalization in 1931, dog-racing has been considered a state-sanctioned monopoly and heavily regulated as the state has granted tax credits and mandated a minimum number of races. A report commissioned by the Florida Legislature to look at the economic impact of gaming in Florida found that taxpayer lose about \$4 million a year on greyhound racing because the state fails to enforce state laws related to the industry.

Unlike other states, Florida’s greyhound industry does not have to report when dogs are injured as a result of racing or training.

Sobel has filed legislation for three years attempting to impose fines on track veterinarians who fail to report race-related injuries. In 2013, she succeeded in passing legislation to require tracks to report greyhound deaths for the first time. The reports concluded that a greyhound dies in Florida an average of once every three days due to race-related causes.

Here is the group's board:

Anjali Sareen, Chair (Altamonte Springs)

Bryan Wilson, Treasurer (Winter Springs)

Bryan is a longtime greyhound advocate

Joan Carlson-Radabaugh, Vice Chair (Vero Beach)

Joan serves as Community Initiatives Director for the **ASPCA**

Chuck Danielian, Vice Chair (Naples)

Chuck is a longtime greyhound advocate

Kelly Faircloth, Vice Chair (Tampa)

Kelly is the President of **Greyhound Rescue and Adoptions of Tampa Bay, Inc.**

Laurie Hood, Vice Chair (Freeport)

Laurie is the Founder of **Alaqua Animal Refuge**

Cathy Houde, Vice Chair (Ocoee)

Cathy is a volunteer District Leader with **The Humane Society of the United States**

Kate MacFall, Vice Chair (Tallahassee)

Kate is the Florida State Director for **The Humane Society of the United States**

Kathy Pelton, Vice Chair (CooperCity)

Kathy serves on the Board of Directors of **GREY2K USA**

Eleanor Sobel, Vice Chair (Hollywood)

Carla Wilson, Vice Chair (Winter Springs)

Carla is a longtime greyhound advocate

Janet Winikoff, Vice Chair (Vero Beach)

Janet is the Director of Education at the **Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County**