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Group wants Seminole to be ground zero for ending greyhound racing



Greyhounds race at Sanford Orlando Kennel club in Longwood. Lawmakers are making another run at reforming the greyhound racing industry - this time armed with the first-ever national report on death and injuries to the dogs.

Kate Santich and Martin E. Comas

Animal-welfare advocates say they can't count on the Legislature to protect greyhounds.

In an effort to sway public sentiment against greyhound racing, animal-welfare advocates announced Monday that they're launching a **Seminole County** ballot initiative requiring the disclosure of injury reports on the dogs and for the dogs to be licensed.

If passed, the ordinance would impact the county's lone racetrack — the **Sanford** Orlando Kennel Club, long a target of protesters — but backers say it is only the first step in an

effort to "phase out" greyhound racing at all 12 of the state's commercial tracks during the next few years.

The ballot measure, dubbed the Greyhound Protection Act, also would require the kennel club's trainers to report the fate of all dogs once they leave the track, including whether they're euthanized, adopted or bred.

The measure has the support of the national advocacy group GREY2K USA; state Sen. **Eleanor Sobel**, D-Hollywood; the Pet Alliance of Greater Orlando; the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; and the Humane Society of the United States.

"Since 2008, there have been at least 42 greyhound deaths at Sanford Orlando," said the ballot initiative's campaign chairwoman, Anjali Sareen, a Seminole County resident. "These greyhounds are confined for up to 23 hours every single day. Greyhounds — animals that are meant to be running and enjoying life — are sitting in cages, rotting away. It's absolutely ludicrous."

Greyhound-racing industry could get more scrutiny

A kennel-club spokesman did not respond to a request for comments. The track's owner, Penn National Gaming — the largest operator of pari-mutuel facilities and regional gaming operations in North America — also would not comment. Christopher McErlean, a vice president of the Pennsylvania-based company, said he had not seen the proposed ballot measure yet.

But the track's former general manager, Mike Newlin, said last March that the animals racing there were well-treated and that he did not oppose injury reporting — as long as it's done uniformly throughout the state.

Since 2013, Florida racetracks have reported the deaths of 258 dogs statewide. The coalition filing the ballot initiative — the Committee to Protect Dogs — contends that is far more than should be expected from natural causes, especially because racing greyhounds are young.

"I think the people who watch greyhound racing don't see what really goes on," said veterinarian Becky Rhoades, vice president of operations for the Pet Alliance of Greater

Orlando. "They don't see where the dogs are kept, how they're hauled around, how they're treated. If people were seeing all these dogs kept in boxes, I think things would change. I think we need to educate people."

GREY2K USA has tried for several years to get the [Florida Legislature](#) to pass mandatory injury reporting but has fallen short. The group plans a similar bill for the 2016 session.

"But we don't want to be in the same position we've been in for the past five years: where we've been metaphorically on the 1-yard line and then get nothing," said Executive Director Carey Theil. "We're not giving up on the Legislature, but we're frustrated, so we're taking a different approach."

The Florida Division of Pari-mutuel Wagering currently regulates the industry. The agency can revoke or suspend the license of a greyhound owner or trainer found to be abusing the animals.

County Commissioners [Lee Constantine](#) and Carlton Henley said Monday that they had not heard of the initiative. The other three commissioners — Brenda Carey, Bob Dallari and John Horan — did not return calls for comment.

The act also would require the greyhounds racing at the Sanford Orlando Kennel Club to be licensed by the county — as residents' dogs are now. Current county law makes the greyhounds exempt from licensing. The dogs often are moved from track to track during the racing season.

In order to qualify for the November 2016 general election, the campaign has only six months to gather 13,305 verified signatures — 5 percent of registered voters in the most recent general election. On Monday, the group sent the proposed ballot initiative to the county Supervisor of Elections Office via overnight mail. Once the supervisor approves it, which should be within a few days, the clock on gathering the signatures will begin.

"I feel confident that this is an issue that has a lot of support with the public," Sareen said. "We treat dogs that are our pets as members of our family. We love them and care for them and rush them to the vet if they get sick. ... Why should these [racing] dogs be exempt from such basic considerations?"

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