



Editorial: End greyhound racing; limit euthanization

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Decouple dog tracks

The Florida Legislature this session is taking up a comprehensive gambling bill that covers the Seminole Tribe's casinos, dog and horse tracks, jai alai frontons, the state lottery and daily fantasy sports websites. Many legislators and Tallahassee observers expect the massive, complicated measure to collapse under its own weight.

At least one aspect of the legislation, however, deserves to be dealt with separately: a provision that would let dog-track owners abandon racing but retain other, existing forms of gambling such as poker rooms. That process is called “decoupling.”

Currently, Florida law requires dog-track owners to provide live racing in order to offer more lucrative types of gambling such as card games.

Yet, neither the state's racing industry nor animal-rights groups support the dog-racing mandate. And, based on dramatic drops in attendance and betting at tracks, few gamblers seem to care about it either.

The total regular handle — the amount bet at pari-mutuels that feature dog racing — declined by 72 percent in Florida between 1990 and 2013. During the same period, taxes and fees paid by tracks and collected by the state dropped by 98 percent.

Meanwhile, concerns about the treatment and safety of racing greyhounds abound. Racing-related deaths have been documented in Florida. Newspapers in the state have reported evidence that dogs have been drugged — with cocaine, for example. And there have long been questions about the conditions under which dogs are kept and “retired.”

Controversies over the Seminole agreement, the proposed decoupling involving horse racing and jai alai, and fantasy sports that threaten the overall gambling bill put the dog-track measures in peril. The Legislature should pass a basic bill approving dog-track decoupling. We urge lawmakers, especially those from our region, to support such legislation.

Gambling opponents who warn that dog tracks will become mini-casinos should face facts: A state that accommodates Seminole casinos, race-track poker rooms and myriad lottery games is a gambling state. Making track owners offer racing that the public no longer supports doesn't make sense. Eliminating the mandate won't hurt anyone, but it will help many greyhounds avoid a fate they don't deserve.

Padi's law

A Florida law requiring the extermination of animals that bite people and cause “severe injury” sparked a cause celebre last year in Bradenton. It should spark the Legislature to change the law to make it more fair and consistent with other statutes.

Padi, a veterinarian’s pet dog, faced euthanization for biting the ear of a little boy — an injury that required sutures and follow-up surgery. How it happened was not clear: Some witnesses said the boy had taunted Padi; others contended the child was playing innocently.

Whatever the case, the law seemed clear: The Manatee County attorney's office maintained that Padi had to be euthanized. A public furor ensued, fueled by social media. County staff and commissioners were flooded with protests from animal-rights activists, many of them mean-spirited.

Eventually, Circuit Judge Andy Owens ruled that, while one state law precluded his consideration of whether Padi’s bite was unprovoked, another allowed owners of pets facing a “dangerous dog investigation and classification” to cite provocation as a reason for an attack. Owens found the difference “illogical and inconsistent” and that the veterinarian's due process rights were at risk.

Padi's case prompted state Rep. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota, to file House Bill 91 which, among other provisions, would allow discretion in the impoundment of animals and remove the automatic euthanization requirement. The bill deserves to a fair hearing in the Legislature, which has a duty to ensure that all state laws are logical and constitutional.