

Will Palm Beach Kennel Club trade dogs for slots?



Michael Mayo

SOUTH FLORIDA SUN-SENTINEL

mmayo@sun-sentinel.com

MARCH 4, 2015, 5:53 PM

I have a friend — let's call him Poker Paul — who went to Palm Beach Kennel Club for a big card tournament last year, but vowed never to return.

He is repulsed by dog racing, thinks it's cruel and inhumane, and he'd rather not set foot in a place where the yelps of greyhounds pierce the air.

All that might change if an ambitious bill to overhaul Florida's gambling scene gains traction. The bill unveiled this week by state Rep. Dana Young, R-Tampa, would allow Palm Beach Kennel Club to ditch the dogs and bring in slot machines.

The so-called "decoupling" effort — which would let dog tracks stop staging races while keeping card rooms and other forms of gambling — would make a lot of animal-rights activists (such as Poker Paul) happy.

The wide-ranging bill (HB1233) would also allow two Vegas-style destination resort casinos in Broward and Miami-Dade counties, introduce a new gambling option known as "historic racing machines" at some tracks, and blow up the entire Seminole Tribe revenue-sharing agreement with the state, even the slot machine portion that's supposed to last until 2030.

The Seminole compact brought nearly \$260 million to the state last year, and roughly \$1 billion since it began in 2010.

It's one thing to introduce a splashy bill, quite another to make that bill a law. In my mind, this effort is a huge long shot. The bill is just too big, too broad, with too many competing interests ready to tear it apart.

Dead on arrival, is how one local gambling executive put it.

What happens if it passes? Slots at the Palm Beach Kennel Club would make the owners — the powerful Rooney family of Pittsburgh Steelers fame — happy, and richer.

Slots at the kennel club would generate perhaps \$50 million in taxes annually for the state. That alone wouldn't be enough to offset the loss of the Seminole revenue, but in concert with destination resorts and other new gambling options, the state is hoping to bring in more than \$350 million a year.

A revamped kennel club could cut into the market share of the Isle Casino in Pompano Beach, which attracts many gamblers from **Boca Raton**, **Delray Beach** and **Boynton Beach**.

But the kennel club would still be at a competitive disadvantage to the Seminole Tribe's Coconut Creek Casino and Hard Rock Resort near Hollywood, which have table games such as blackjack and baccarat and which might get craps and roulette.

To me, the biggest intrigue with the latest maneuverings is what it means for the Seminoles, the reigning kings of the South Florida gambling scene. This bill is a major slap at the tribe, with the backers basically saying, "Who needs you and your stinking \$260 million a year?"

Tribal spokesman Gary Bitner said the tribe still hopes to extend the blackjack/table games portion of the compact, which lapses in July, and that negotiations with Gov. Scott and legislators (who must ratify any new deal) are ongoing.

"The tribe is not disheartened," Bitner said. "The tribe is very optimistic. We've got two months in the legislative session. A lot can happen."

mmayo@sunsentinel.com, 954-356-4508.

Copyright © 2015, Sun Sentinel
