

Editorial: Reform greyhound racing

It is good news that Hillsborough state Rep. Dana Young and the House leadership have apparently given up on a gambling bill that would allow two massive destination casinos in South Florida and enact other measures that would promote the gambling industry.

As we've said, Florida's family-friendly brand that draws tourists and businesses alike doesn't need to follow in the unsavory footsteps of Las Vegas and Atlantic City. The Senate's plan to simply extend the Seminole compact for a year is far more sensible than trying to devise a major gambling package.

Young, to her credit, has scaled back her measure, but lawmakers still will need to carefully monitor the process and oppose any gambling expansion.

Still, Young's bill includes long-needed reforms on greyhound racing that do merit support, but the Legislature must be cautious that it doesn't morph into something more insidious.

A key measure would "decouple" greyhound racing from a track's gambling license. Greyhound tracks now must run dog races to keep their licenses for card games and other gambling operations.

Animal protection groups say that the public's dwindling interest in dog racing has made it increasingly unprofitable and at least some tracks would drop it if they could keep their gambling licenses.

They should be allowed to reduce the number of races or drop them altogether, as Young bill allows.

Unfortunately, the legislation also would extend the hours of operation for slot machines at the tracks from 18 to 24 hours, 7 days a week. We would prefer lawmakers not allow any expansion.

The measure would not force operations to drop the races, but leave that to the marketplace. But we don't see a resurgence in support for the races.

Grey2K USA, an organization that opposes dog races, says more than 11,000 injuries to racing greyhounds and 909 deaths were reported from 2008 to 2014. In Florida, 183 greyhounds have died from May 2013 through November 2014.

The legislation would require that injuries to racing greyhounds be reported. It is shameful that Florida is one of only two states that does have such a mandate. A Senate bill also would require greyhound injuries to be reported.

In addition, Young's legislation would require dog tracks to open a greyhound adoption booth that must be operated on weekends by legitimate animal-adoption organizations. The track would list in its program racing greyhounds that would be available for future adoption.

We wish Florida didn't have any gambling, but it can't simply banish forms of gambling that have been legal for generations. Decoupling offers a way to curtail or even eliminate dog racing. Lawmakers should pursue decoupling and other greyhound racing reforms but otherwise hold the line on gambling.