

THE NEWS-PRESS

Dog track slots bill remains long shot Senate passes plan, but House is opposed

By Mark S. Krzos

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At one time there were nearly 30 greyhound racetracks in Florida. Now there are 13.

The odds the remaining survive - including the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track - increased a bit Thursday when the Florida Senate voted to allow slot machines at every racetrack and jai alai fronton.

The plan would allow pari-mutuels to operate video lottery terminals - a type of slot machine that pits players against one another as opposed to Las Vegas-style slots, which pit players against the house and offer higher payouts.

Passage of the bill, sponsored by Dennis Jones, R-Seminole, remains a long shot, however.

The Republican-controlled House opposes an expansion of gambling.

A companion bill also passed the Senate. It would give South Florida jai alai frontons and horse and dog tracks a tax break on their slot machine earnings to help compete against expanding Seminole Indian gambling. That does not affect Southwest Florida.

Despite the House's stance, Izzy Havenick, vice president of Southwest Florida Enterprises, owners of the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track, is optimistic.

"We're excited and we think it's great for Florida and will be an economic boon," said Havenick, whose family owns the Bonita track and Flagler Dog Track. "It's no secret that the state of Florida is in desperate need of revenue and this is a realistic way to raise money without raising taxes."

Conservatives remain opposed to an expansion of gaming.

"I just want to rise in defense of communities," said Sen. Ronda Storms, R-Brandon. "Like cancer, it creeps everywhere and then you have an endless expansion of gambling."

Storms noted the state's sheriffs are opposed.

"They do understand the increase of crime," she said.

While noting the measure could raise between \$354 million and \$500 million for education, Jones said crime fell an average of 7.3 percent in Broward County when gambling was expanded there.

As much as \$3 million in gambling revenue is dedicated to increased law enforcement, making the establishments "the safest place to be," Jones said.

Bonita Springs City Manager Gary Price isn't buying the pro-slots arguments.

"We pay \$2 million a year for 16 community policing officers, so \$3 million statewide is chump change," said Price, who questioned if the addition of slots would bring any benefit to Bonita Springs.

Price said the goal of casinos is to keep people in casinos, and that there was talk of building a hotel at the dog track in Bonita Springs.

"If they do something like the Hard Rock, how many of those people do you think would leave (and spend money in Bonita Springs) when they have restaurants and nightclubs right there?" he said. "I don't see much benefit in it."

Nancy Hamilton, spokeswoman for the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau, said she wasn't sure if slots would be beneficial.

"I think it'll depend on how they set it up," she said. "If it stimulates the local economy, we'd be in favor of it."

Gov. Charlie Crist last year signed a compact with the Seminoles allowing the tribe to have blackjack and Las Vegas-style slot machines. The state's pari-mutuel industry also wants a piece of that action.

Havenick sees slots as the life-saver for pari-mutuels - and the only way to even the playing field between that industry and the Seminoles.

"The Immokalee casino is right up the road and it's no secret that they're going to be doing something there," he said. "This would allow us to compete, remain a local tourist attraction, create more jobs and raise money for the Naples, Bonita Springs and Fort Myers area."

That's music to the ears of Bonita Springs City Councilman Dick Ferreira.

"That's one of the things the council pressed on our lobbyists last year - that any increase in gambling ... the local community will get a piece of the action," Ferreira said.

"It's not a moral issue for me. We are concerned about public safety, but we're also concerned about more people coming to the track and impacting our roads and infrastructure."

Havenick said while clearing the Senate was a big step, getting past the more conservative House is an even bigger hurdle.

"We're a long way off," he said. "Even if it moved fast, the earliest we could see slots is 2009 or 2010."

— *Gannett News Service and The Associated Press contributed to this report.*