

Bill to help Florida's frontons and racetracks faces long odds

A bill to help racetracks and frontons survive will likely die in the state House.

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MELBOURNE - Struggling dog tracks in Melbourne, Daytona Beach and across the state could get a boost from a gambling bill that passed the Florida Senate on Thursday, but few are betting it will win in the House.

House Speaker Marco Rubio adamantly opposes any expansion of gambling in Florida, and a greyhound-advocacy group called the bill a "dog-and-pony show."

The bill, sponsored by state Sen. Dennis Jones, R-St. Petersburg, would allow all pari-mutuels, including jai-alai frontons and dog and horse tracks, to operate bingo-like electronic games if they don't have slot machines. The Senate also approved a plan to lower tax rates on slot machines in Broward County to help their owners compete against the Seminole Tribe's casinos -- another bill with a questionable future.

Proponents said the package of bills would help revive the state's struggling pari-mutuels, some of which have operated in Florida for more than 70 years.

The addition of poker rooms and high-stakes games such as Texas Hold 'em last year helped the industry stay afloat, but it's not enough, said Patrick T. Biddix, president and general manager of the

Melbourne Greyhound Park in Brevard County.

"South Florida was fortunate enough to get slot machines and the Indians have them, but the rest of us are just trying to get another life preserver," he said.

That's the last thing greyhound-rescue groups want to see happen.

"There is no question these bills would prop up an industry that is cruel and inhumane," said Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA, a nonprofit advocacy group targeting the 41 greyhound tracks in 13 states. Dog-racing supporters say the animals are treated humanely and under safe conditions.

Theil said he is confident both proposed bills will fail.

"This is just high-priced lobbyists wanting to show their clients they are doing something," Theil added. "This is nothing but a dog-and-pony show."

The video-lottery terminals are slot-like machines that operate like a bingo game, with players competing against each other.

"They were in all the Hard Rock facilities before they got permission for real slot machines," Biddix said. "They are fun, and people will enjoy playing them."

They are not the same as Vegas-style slots, which offer bigger payouts and have players compete against the house.

The Vegas slots are now operating in three Broward pari-mutuels and are allowed in seven Indian casinos in the state.

The video-lottery bill, which could raise up to \$500 million a year for public schools, passed the Senate in a 27-11 vote.

The tax-break measure sponsored by Senate Minority Leader Steve Geller, D-Cooper City, would reduce the tax on Broward's slot machines from 50 percent to 35 percent. It passed the Senate 25-12. "At 50 percent, the pari-mutuels are losing money or just breaking even," Geller said. "If the Indians get additional gambling and the pari-mutuels don't, I'd expect at least one or possibly all three to close."

The Indian slots are not taxed, but a compact the tribe signed guarantees a

\$150 million-a-year payment to the state.

While Broward voters approved slot machines in the county's four pari-mutuel facilities, only three have so far chosen to install them -- Gulfstream Park and Mardi Gras Race Track and Gaming, both of Hallandale Beach, and The Isle Casino in Pompano Beach.

Geller said Dania Jai-Alai and three pari-mutuels in Miami-Dade County recently authorized by voters to install the slot machines are likely not to do so unless the tax rate goes down.

Even if the video-lottery bill became law it might not affect pari-mutuels in Seminole County because a charter amendment passed about 10 years ago requires a local referendum to approve any gambling expansion.

In the past, county commissioners have refused to put such referendums on the ballot.

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