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Election 2008



Voters get new chance to prohibit greyhound racing

By CATHERINE BAUM
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Mark Nadeau, a Southamptton man who owns a greyhound that used to race in Connecticut, made up his mind about greyhound racing in Massachusetts.

On Tuesday, he is set to vote to prohibit dog races in the Bay State on which betting or wagering occurs. But Nadeau admits he's a bit "iffy" about what proponents of the measure say.

"I'm going to vote yes on the thing ... my only reservations are that I hate to rely on false information," Nadeau said. "I believe I've got some erroneous information in the past."

Such misinformation includes the mistreatment of racing greyhounds at the tracks, he said.

"It wouldn't be in the best interest to mistreat the dogs to the point that they wouldn't perform well - that just doesn't make any sense," said Nadeau, who is in favor of the law because he believes greyhounds are over bred in the name of the sport.

Greyhounds have raced in Massachusetts for 70 years. If Question 3 passes, the proposed law, which includes a civil penalty of \$20,000 or more to the State Racing Commission if violated, would become effective Jan. 1, 2010.

The question to ban dog racing in Massachusetts also appeared on the 2000 ballot. This year's question is different in that it adds a phase-out period to close down the two tracks, Wonderland Greyhound Park in Revere and Raynham-Taunton Greyhound Park in Raynham.

Also, there is more information about the sport this time around, as greyhound-racing injuries became public record in 2002.

Nearly 800 injuries were recorded out of 465,176 greyhound starts at the Massachusetts tracks from 2002 to 2007, according to the commission's records. In other words, about 0.15 percent of greyhound starts have resulted in injuries over five years.

Christine Dorchak, co-chairwoman of the Committee to Protect Dogs, said 80 percent of those reported injuries are broken legs, with an average recovery time of eight months.

Some of the injuries include "cardiac arrest, paralysis and head trauma," Dorchak said. "This is no way to treat a dog."

Glenn Totten, communications director for the campaign against Question 3, said he doesn't deny the injuries, but believes the numbers are used by the opposing side to mislead voters.

"What the opposition has done is fundamentally sensationalized the injuries," said Totten, who noted

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there are no documented cases of abuse at a commonwealth dog track. "They'd have you believe that greyhound racing was a canine demolition derby."

Besides the nature of greyhound racing injuries, Dorchak said the size of greyhound crates and the lengthy time the animals spend in them are another cause for concern.

"Some greyhounds cannot even stand up or turn around in their cages," Dorchak said. She added that as revenues decline in the dog racing industry there is less money to feed and provide proper shelter for the dogs.

Linda Jensen, a greyhound breeder who works closely with various adoption groups, said the dogs spend 16 hours a day sleeping. They race at least once every 10 days and don't race more than once every three days.

"They love to run - that's where their inclination is and that's where their hearts are," Jensen said. "When you first see a greyhound you may think it's thin but it's because it's an athlete, like an Olympic athlete."

In Massachusetts, 31 percent of greyhounds are adopted out, according to the State Racing Commission. The majority of greyhounds move on to other tracks and some return to farms to be bred.

If the measure passes, Totten said he believes 95 percent of racing greyhounds will go to one of the 37 other tracks in the country.

"They're willing to send the dogs to a place where they don't have anywhere near the protection they get here and throw a lot of people out of work... why?," said Totten, who noted there are about 1,000 employees at the tracks.

Duchark agrees that if the question passes, two-thirds of the greyhounds would go to other racetracks in the country, some of which are in states that do not have an open records law for injuries.

"Our initiative would be to take Massachusetts out of the circle of cruelty," Duchark said.

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