

July 6, 2009

Slots and the session

SENATE NEEDS NEW LEADERSHIP

By Dennis Keene

I feel compelled to share my profound disappointment in the Senate's orchestrated defeat of House Bill 2, critical legislation which would have saved our ailing horse racing industry.

Employees of the industry successfully made their case for needing assistance in order to survive in Kentucky.

Without video lottery terminals (VLTs) to help make them competitive with other states our racetracks, including Northern Kentucky's Turfway Park, will continue to lose races, horses, owners, jockeys and trainers to tracks that have seen the economic boon VLTs provide.

Under the leadership of Gov. Steve Beshear, House Speaker Greg Stumbo and Speaker Pro Tem Larry Clark, legislation was presented in the special session that offered a survival mechanism for Kentucky's signature industry.

House Bill 2 was projected to generate \$693 million in revenues in 2010, enough to help shore up the horse industry through larger purses and breeders' incentives.

It was a great plan but the brilliance of House Bill 2 was in the school construction plan that would have allowed Kentucky to rebuild crumbling, dilapidated schools. We would have been able to replace the oldest schools with leaking roofs, rotting boards and mildewed walls, thus ensuring a safe and more appropriate learning environment for our children.

Also included in this plan was funding for our institutions of higher education. Northern Kentucky University would have received \$55 million for a building to help accommodate growing enrollment.

Our community and technical colleges — which provide so much of the training and retraining of our adult workers who have lost their jobs in this struggling economy — would have received funding as well. Gateway Community and Technical College was slated to receive \$1.8 million to purchase technology and equipment.

Who could vote against such a proposal, one that would save our horse racing industry and provide such hope and opportunity for our children and families? Our Kentucky Senate, of course.

The House voted HB 2 out of its chambers on June 19, day four of the special session, with a vote of 52-45.

I am proud of my yes vote on HB 2, and I am equally proud that my Northern Kentucky colleagues — Rep. Alecia Webb-Edgington, R-Fort Wright, Rep. Adam Koenig, R-Erlanger, and Rep. Sal Santoro, R-Florence — joined me in voting for this legislation.

What frustrates me is that our Senate counterparts turned their back on our horse

racing industry and our children with no remorse or plausible excuse.

HB 2 was heard in the Senate Appropriations and Revenue Committee, but died a quick death when the vote was cast. It was denigrated from its inception by the Senate that refused to allow the bill to get to the floor for a vote.



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Legislation to allow VLTs at Kentucky racetracks has been discussed for more than three years. Like Senate leadership, previous House leaders blocked attempts to give the bill a full and open debate on the House floor.

Members in the House figured out that we needed to change leadership in order to save horse racing in Kentucky and in January we did just

that. We elected leaders who committed to bringing the VLT discussion to the floor so members could vote it up or down. Just six months later, that promise was fulfilled.

I suggest Senate members take a page from our book and work to effect the change that is so desperately needed in their chamber.

Millions of dollars were left on the table this session, money that would have made a significant impact on our future. I urge visionary members of the Senate to take action. The time has come to vote in new leaders and join the House in saving our horse racing industry and helping our children and grandchildren succeed in this competitive world.