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Churchill: Horse racing doesn't deserve public money

Why should taxpayers so generously support such a dubious activity?

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Horses running last year at Belmont Park. Chris Churchill asks: Given recent horse deaths at Belmont Park and Churchill Downs, why should New York taxpayers continue to generously support such a dubious activity?

Sarah Stier/Getty Images

ALBANY — Two more horses died at Belmont Park over the weekend, the 16th and 17th “equine deaths” at the Long Island track this year are the latest stains on a troubled industry.

Meanwhile, that very same Belmont is getting a \$455 million taxpayer-funded loan from the state, funding that is just a sliver of the staggering amount of public money handed to horse racing in New York in recent years. So, let me again ask: Why should taxpayers be asked to bless the industry?

The dead horse problem is not going away. In fact, it seems to be getting worse.

Churchill Downs in Kentucky recently was forced to suspend racing after 12 horses died at the famed track from April 27 to May 27. Federal and state regulators are investigating the spate of fatalities.

Particulars aside, the reasons for the deaths should be obvious. An activity that encourages animals to run at the highest possible speeds with incredible sums of money at stake is going to put those animals in danger. The incentives to push thoroughbreds toward their breaking point will always be impossible for some breeders and trainers to resist.

No new rules or regulations can change that, so the embarrassing weekends for horse racing won't stop. Already this year, thirty-five horses have died at New York tracks, according to a state database.

Not that it's my place to tell people what leisure activities they should enjoy. I have spent afternoons at the Saratoga Race Course. I eat meat and dairy from farms that are more industrial than pastoral. When it comes to animal welfare, most of us have areas where we can improve.

The question here is about public support. Horse racing would hardly exist without taxpayer backing that in New York alone totaled \$2.9 billion since 2008, according to a Times Union analysis. Why are we propping it up? Is it a wise investment?

All available data suggests it isn't. Consider that 41 horse tracks have closed nationally since 2000, a drop happening in no small part because the main reason people go to a track — betting — is now widely available in other places. At Belmont, meanwhile, attendance fell by 88 percent from 1978 to 2019, a decline that is somewhat due to televised racing but also stems from falling interest.

Nevertheless, Gov. Kathy Hochul has decided to gamble on the industry, offering a “loan” to rebuild Belmont that is unlikely to be repaid without continued public subsidies and revenue from state video lottery terminals. The money will winterize Belmont, allowing it to operate year-round; build a new grandstand, and allow for the construction of a casino at the nearby Aqueduct track in Queens.

All of this, we're told, should be celebrated because it will be an economic boon for Long Island and protect thousands of jobs statewide.

Will it really? Of course not. The further decline of horse racing is inevitable, no matter how much money the state throws toward the cause. Even if the so-called loan really does boost the economy, the boon will come at the expense of gamblers — including some whose families can't afford the losses — and the horses themselves. It isn't an appropriate use of public money.

“What kind of destination are we building?” John Schieb, a critic of racing subsidies, asked during a recent legislative hearing. “If you use past five-year averages, the new Belmont Park will now be the destination where more horses go to die than any other track in America.”

Now there's an attraction worth celebrating! If nothing else, the plan helps illustrate how wildly contradictory we are when it comes to how we view and treat animals. For example, greyhound racing is effectively illegal in New York and most other states, because we've determined that dogs shouldn't be abused that way. Horse racing, however, is still deemed worthy of public support.

Yet lawmakers, noting the dignity and beauty of the animals, just passed a law that would prohibit the slaughter of horses for human consumption — even as taxpayers prop up an activity in which those dignified animals die so that people can place bets on their frenzied running.

While asking New York's government to behave and spend logically is like asking a toddler to build a gazebo — expectations shouldn't exceed capabilities — I do wish somebody could explain how any of this makes sense. Anybody?



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Churchill is one of the most well-known names, and faces, at the Times Union. His columns — published on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays — are shared heavily on social media and have won several awards. Churchill studied English and history at the University of Texas before beginning his journalism career at small weeklies in Maine, later working at the Biddeford Journal Tribune, Waterville Morning Sentinel and Kennebec Journal newspapers. He started at the Times Union as a business writer in 2007 and became a columnist in 2012. Reach him at cchurchill@timesunion.com or 518-454-5442.