

WEST BROOKLYN – Bob chomps his bit and stomps the sand. A cloud of chalky dust drifts toward the practice track. This racehorse wants to run – same as he does most days here at Rivendell Standards horse farm.

But unless the state passes legislation this week that would allow slot machines at horse tracks, breeder and Rivendell owner Bernie Paul says the racing days for Bob and most other horses in Illinois could be cut short at the end of this season.

“At one time, horse racing was a really good business, ... but it doesn’t make sense from an economic standpoint to keep running horses anymore,” Paul said. “I’ll have to sell everything.”

Slot machines are needed to bring back patrons who have abandoned racetracks to gamble at casinos, Paul said.

The state’s racehorse industry “is on life support” and needs slot machines at tracks “to save thousands of jobs,” according to the Illinois Harness Horseman’s Association.

The group is lobbying hard for the state Senate to approve the bill this week during its special budget session.

Senate leadership, however, hasn’t brought the bill for a vote.

Paul and many in the horse industry assert that riverboat casinos have a stranglehold on the state Senate, and have persuaded Senate President John Cullerton, D-Chicago, to let the bill die amid budget negotiations.

“We’re just asking for an up or down vote. ... Let the will of the people be heard,” Paul said.

Paul and a spokesman for the Horseman’s Association both said they think the Senate would pass the bill.

“To ignore the common good of Illinois in favor of a few special interests where the money is going to out-of-state casino operators, ... it’s unconscionable,” Paul said.

Cullerton did not respond to several e-mails and telephone messages left at a variety of locations over the weekend to comment on this story.

Tom Green, who manages Blackhawk Music, a coin-operated entertainment company in Sterling, said riverboat casinos will lobby relentlessly against the measure.

Riverboats “look at us as a training ground for their customers, but horse tracks, they look at them as competition,” Green said.

Horse tracks in Illinois – and the horse industry that depends on their earnings – have seen wagers nosedive in recent years, with handles slashed by half in just the past 6 months.

One of Paul's horses, for instance, placed fifth in a Friday race. His cut: \$145, or 5 percent of a \$2,900 purse. The winner of that race took home \$1,450.

“If you race and lose and come back empty-handed, that's one thing – It's part of the deal. But when you run a good race and place and you get a check that you can't even pay for the gas to get there, that's what's really frustrating,” Paul said.

The so-called “racinos” could generate between \$100 million and \$300 million for capital projects in Illinois, and would make up the difference for revenue that never came in when Chicago opted out of allowing video gaming in bars, according to the Horseman's Association.

The bill also would put 3 percent of slot earnings back in horse breeders' pockets.

Paul said he'll be out of business in a year or two unless the legislation passes.

The concept is nothing new, according to horse lobbying group savethecapitalbill.com, which says Illinois and New Jersey are the only two states with both riverboat casinos and horse tracks that have yet to allow slots at tracks.

Iowa, Indiana, Wisconsin and Minnesota all have some form of racino, and the interstate competition has squeezed Illinois tracks and breeders too hard, Paul said.

“This bill will be able to allow us to raise purses to compete with other states that have slots at the racetracks,” Paul said.