

Lawmakers debate dogfights

By Tim Richard
staff writer

To state Rep. Gerald Law, dogfighting is a dirty, big business, combining the evils of drugs, gambling and cruelty. The Plymouth Republican says the way to stop it is tougher and more creative punishment.

To state Rep. Tom Power, Law's plan is too punitive. "A four-year felony for being present (at a dog fight)? Guilt by association? Jeez! This thing is so hokey I don't even want to bother with it," said the Traverse City Republican.

With that and a few other expletives, Power walked out of the fourth-floor State Capitol room Tuesday as members of the House Judiciary Committee debated Law's House Bill 4909.

Judiciary chairman Perry Bullard, D-Ann Arbor, wouldn't take a final vote. He ordered the bill rewritten to provide staggered penalties for repeat violators. "Looks like we've got a re-draft for next week," Bullard said.

SUPPORTED by the Michigan Humane Society, Law's bill would amend the penal code providing for fines of up to \$100,000 (20 times the current level) and up to 1,500 hours of community service to avoid overcrowding jails.

The bill also would punish trainers, manufacturers of training device-

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— Eileen M. Liska
Michigan Humane Society

es, publishers of dog fighting newsletters, breeders and viewers of dogfights. State law already prohibits dogfights, cockfights and bear-baiting.

"If you don't have the audience, you don't have the business," said Eileen M. Liska, director of research and legislation for the Michigan Humane Society.

"This is more prevalent than most people realize. This state is part of the Great Lakes circuit. Many in the audience also breed (fighting) dogs," she said in defense of the harsh penalties for audiences.

AFTER THE meeting, Liska outlined how the business works.

"There are two types of dog fights: unorganized, usually in basements in Detroit; and organized, in more remote areas of the state."

She declined to say where organized dogfighting occurs. "I shouldn't tell you where. We've got investigations going on."

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Breeders keep the "gamest" puppies, usually euthanizing the rest. But sometimes the other puppies are sold to people who use them as guard dogs for crack houses.

Wagers run into the "tens of thousands of dollars," she said.

As for Power's complaint that fines for rape are lower than Law's proposed fines for dog fighting, Liska said, "That's the fault with the rape laws."

LAW CALLED his measure a follow-up to 1988's vicious animal law. "It's really an anti-gambling piece of legislation. We're talking big dollars — drugs and gambling. It's not easy to catch these people. It takes a year or two of investigation," he said.

Law's bill survived two attempts to cut the punishments in half, but Power convinced Bullard that there should be a scale of fines rather than a big fine for the first offense.

Law held out for the big fines. "The bill says 'up to.' They (judges) can go up to \$100,000 if it's a multiple situation. The first fine may be only a few thousand."

Barely half the 19-member Judiciary Committee attended Tuesday's meeting, leading Bullard to quip: "There are some people I haven't seen for several meetings, but I've forgotten who they are."

Scheduled House Judiciary Committee meetings are at 10 a.m. Tuesdays.

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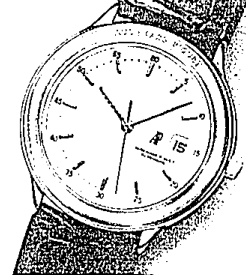
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