

BREAKING NEWS: Fort Erie Race Track reaches deal with province for transitional funding

JOHN ROBBINS/Bullet News

FORT ERIE – The Ontario government has reached a deal with the Fort Erie Race Track for transitional funding to keep the 116-year-old border oval alive.

News of the deal with Fort Erie and two other tracks was announced by Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne this morning.

Details of the funding agreement have not been released.

“(The premier) announced the Fort Erie Race Track is a go,” Niagara Falls MPP Kim Craitor told Bullet News by telephone around noon.

Craitor added that he could not say anything more about the agreement or what it will mean for the track in terms of operating this coming season.



He anticipates some of those details will be made public by race track officials later this week.

Jim Thibert, chief executive officer of the Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium, has called a press conference for Thursday at 11 a.m.

The future of horse-racing in Ontario was thrown into considerable doubt this time last year when the provincial Liberals under former premier Dalton

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McGuinty announced plans to kill the slots-at-racetracks revenue sharing program, which had, since the mid 1990s, seen hundreds of millions of dollars a year channeled into the horse-racing industry.

At the same time, the province also announced the closure of slot facilities in Fort Erie, Windsor and Sarnia.

The decisions prompted a loud protest from the industry, which employs 55,000 to 60,000 people, and from politicians and citizens in communities affected by the potential closure of race tracks and businesses that depend on them.

Under pressure from the NDP, the government agreed to provide transitional funding to help race tracks and others in the industry to adjust to the new reality. A panel was struck to come up with an industry plan moving forward.

The political fallout from the decision to kill the slots funding caused internal strife within the Liberal party, which has been accused by the opposition Progressive Conservatives of abandoning rural Ontario and putting tens of thousands of jobs at risk.

Premier Wynne, who is serving as her own minister of agriculture, has said she is committed to ensuring there is a future for the horse-racing industry in Ontario, although she acknowledge it will be a smaller industry than it had been in the past.

So far, nine race tracks have signed on to agreements with the province for transition funding. The other two tracks mentioned in Tuesday's announcement were Flamboro Downs and Georgian Downs. Western Fair, Clinton, Hanover and Elora also signed agreements-in-principle with the province earlier this month, while Woodbine and Mohawk race tracks signed on Jan. 23.

Details of the agreements have not been made public as yet, presumably since negotiations with the remaining race tracks is ongoing.

The Fort Erie Race Track is one of the largest employers in a community hard hit by job losses during the past two years. The track is one of only two thoroughbred race tracks in Ontario, the other being Woodbine. Fort Erie is home to the venerable Prince of Wales Stakes, the second jewel in Canada's Triple Crown of horse racing.