

Consortia working on Racetrack solution

Posted By Kris Dubé
October 22, 2009

For the third year in a row, the future of the Fort Erie Racetrack has not been solidified for its next season of live-racing.

Last month, the newly-formed Fort Erie Thoroughbred Racing Consortia, a group consisting of representatives from the Fort Erie Economic Development and Tourism Corporation (EDTC), the Town of Fort Erie and the Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association (HBPA) announced its proposal to keep the track open, requesting support from the provincial government to the tune of \$75 million over the course of five years. As of this week, EDTC general manager Jim Thibert has not been given an answer but hopes the fact that the track is Fort Erie's largest employer will be recognized and a solution will be reached.

"The track is the largest single private-sector employer in Fort Erie, induces economic spin-off and helps promote Fort Erie....that is why the track is so important to Fort Erie," said Thibert.

Since 2002, Thibert has been working on making the track more viable, but with the impact of certain border issues he says it is a difficult task. Back then, the 112-year-old border oval welcomed about 10,000 people a day, and 84 per cent of them visiting from across the border.

Currently, that number had dwindled to 35 per cent of the track's daily population.

Thibert attributes this to the strengthening of the Canadian dollar, passport requirements, increased competition in the U.S., non-smoking legislation among other reasons.

He is also optimistic in pointing out that the Fort Erie Racetrack's revenue streams are not declining as quickly as other live-racing facilities in the province and the industry as a whole.

"This is a sign that we have a good product with potential here at the Fort Erie Racetrack, a product we hope to continue to leverage for the betterment of the local community and the horse-racing industry as a whole," said Thibert.

He compared the EDTC's efforts with rebuilding Fleet Canada, recruiting DMI industries to replace Ronal and assisting Rich Products with two expansions, saying these are all examples of successful strategies to create and sustain jobs in Fort Erie.

"In my 28 years of public service, dedicated to community economic development, I have learned that regardless of how much work it may be, it is far better to keep an existing business than to replace it," he said.

According to Thibert, Fort Erie's economy has grown since 2002 and its unemployment rate has been stable with 500 people claiming employment insurance consistently over the last five years. He feels these statistics are proof the racetrack can survive in Fort Erie if the right plan is put in place and the facility is operated and managed by the right people.

"When successful, the EDTC believes the site of the Fort Erie Racetrack and Slots can be a major gateway from the U.S. to Niagara and support the destination tourism marketplace, bringing more tourists and spending more time and money in Fort Erie," said Thibert.

Niagara Falls-Fort Erie MPP Kim Craitor feels an answer from the province will come "relatively quickly" and said he has been discussing the future of the track regularly at Queen's Park, with Thibert and with the HBPA.

He said he doesn't want to see "a repeat of last year" and that he supports the latest proposal the Consortia has presented....but it might need some friendly amendments considering \$75 million is a large sum of money.

"I support a solution to keep the track open but I don't know if we can do it exactly the way it's been proposed," said Craitor.