
Fort Erie Race Track secures 2014 funding

By Bullet News
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Photo courtesy of Michael Burns.

JOHN ROBBINS/KRIS DUBE - Bullet News

FORT ERIE - There will be a 2014 racing season in Fort Erie after all.

On Friday, it was announced that the province has struck a deal with the Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium.

The future of the 116-year-old border oval had been in doubt for some time, after a three-party panel recommended dropping the track from the list of regularly funded tracks.

In a letter from John Snobelen, a former Conservative cabinet minister who is one third of the panel, he explains to Premier Kathleen Wynne that funds have been secured for a full season in Fort Erie.

It was recommended late last year that Fort Erie could have a future if it focused on a festival race format.

That prompted track officials to submit a proposal for a Year of The Horse Festival, centred around this year's Chinese New Year theme.

Track officials had been waiting since late last fall for word from the province.

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The issue of whether the track would race this year has been a major one in the current provincial byelection in Niagara Falls.

Specific details about the format of the upcoming season at the Fort Erie Race Track will be ironed out in the next two weeks, explained Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium chief executive officer Jim Thibert.

Thibert said Friday's announcement only confirms there will be a racing calendar at the Fort Erie Race Track in 2014 and any news about the festival will arrive later from Ontario's Ministry of Tourism.

"That's a whole separate entity," Thibert told Bullet News Niagara on Friday.

He said solidifying the funding to run a fall schedule is the most important part and that stall applications will be filed by horsepeople over the next few days.

"We will be racing," said Thibert.

In Oct. 2013, the Ontario government provided \$400 in funding for racetracks all over the province, but Fort Erie was left off the list.

This was followed by the suggestion from the province that a festival meet could be co-ordinated or even that the track could remain open for the Prince of Wales Stakes Race, the second jewel in the Canadian Triple Crown of horse racing.

"This is \$60 million in infrastructure that you can't just gear-up for a few days," said Thibert on Friday.

In the current business plan, it is claimed the track would need \$7.8 million for a successful season in 2014, but Thibert said that figure might be adjusted as the plan is finalized and brought back to the province, no later than next Wednesday.

He said the opening date will also be decided as discussions continue over the next few days.

In 2013, 400 races came out of the gate in 43 days at the Fort Erie Race Track.

Thibert said it makes more sense to schedule the season bases on the amount of races and not how many days.

"Race dates are a 100-year-old concept," said Thibert.

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Last season, several race dates were cancelled due to a number of reasons such as weather, too small of a pool to choose from and an outbreak of equine herpes at Woodbine, which had a negative impact on scheduling in Fort Erie.

Thibert said finding strategies to make up for lost races needs to be implemented into the plan for this season.

“We have to generate more revenue and more attention and that's what we're focused on,” he said.

Since a byelection for the Niagara Falls riding was called, local candidates and provincial and provincial party leaders have made several campaign stops at the track.

Thibert doesn't consider the funding announcement on Friday to be connected to the electoral contest, especially since he and the Fort Erie community, along with Liberal opposition at Queen's Park have been pressuring the government to take action on this file, long before the writ was dropped.

“It has been around much longer than that,” said Thibert.

He said the track is a unique issue, because it's something that's been supported in some way by each of the parties before and during the byelection campaign.

“I think all of the parties collectively focused their attention and said this is a good thing to do,” said Thibert.

Fort Erie Mayor Doug Martin said this the kind of news for which he and the town had been waiting.

“This is great news for the horsepeople, track employees, visitors and our community,” said Martin.

“The Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium has been working collaboratively with the (Horse Racing Industry Transition) Panel and the (Ontario Racing) Commission to ensure that the historic Fort Erie Race Track remains open and all parties continue working towards a sustainable plan for the future of horseracing in our community and communities throughout the province.”