

Infrastructure funding needed for speedway



By Kris Dube / News Editor
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An artist's rendering of the proposed Canadian Motor Speedway

FORT ERIE - The Canadian Motor Speedway is moving ahead even though an approximate \$60-million commitment from the provincial government that would cover costs of needed infrastructure improvements in the area of the 823-acre project in Fort Erie has not been provided.

The widening of thoroughfares in the area of the proposed project and the reconstruction of the Bowen Road QEW interchange all need to be completed for the \$400-million development to continue moving ahead at full speed.

The \$60 million figure is subject to change as the process unfolds.

“The CMS needs the province to commit financially,” says Erik Tomas, media and public relations consultant for the speedway.

If the funds are not provided by the provincial government – the project's plans will need to be revised.

“If commitment from the province is not secured, we will have to review development objectives to a suitable plan with minimal risks,” Tomas told Bullet News.

The Bowen Road interchange has been identified by the Ministry of Transportation as needing renewal and it is in contact with the CMS group.

The Town of Fort Erie is tasked with securing a commitment from the province for other necessary infrastructure improvements.

“They will need these improvements to secure an investment as large as CMS,” said Tomas.

He said a decision from the Ontario Ministry of Transportation (MTO) is expected by the end of the year on how it plans to proceed with the Bowen Road overpass, a rebuild that could see it transformed into a four-lane interchange.

“That decision should be forthcoming in the next month and a half,” said Tomas.

Once this occurs, the team at CMS will begin its site plan approval process with the municipality.

The Town of Fort Erie's interim chief administrative officer told Bullet News the amount needed from the province, or even the federal government, has not been finalized but said \$60 million is an accurate estimation.

The Town's application to the province for water and sewer improvements around the site is \$42 million.

The remaining cost lies in what direction is taken when rebuilding the Bowen Road interchange – either a two-lane or four-lane plan.

“Right now, we're in the process to determine what's going to be required at that interchange,” said Kuchyt.

The province committed in 2010 to support infrastructure near the site, which Tomas said they are still waiting to “come to fruition.”

Tomas also said the project's architectural firm, the IBI Group Inc., has been reviewing data and studies related to the project – while also working on items such as a landscaping plan and determining the elevation of the track surfaces.

“While all this is going on with the MTO – they are doing this in the background,” said Tomas.

The proposed project includes an oval and a road track.

He said racing fans who are eager to see the project become a reality shouldn't be discouraged because they don't see bulldozers on site and ground being turned.

“Just because that's not happening – it doesn't mean there's nothing progressing,” he said.

The first phase of the site plan process will focus on the development's oval course and grandstands – which are planned to accommodate up to 65,000 people during main events at the speedway.

Tomas said once the speedway is in operation – eight to 10 special events will be scheduled per year and could include functions such as trade shows and music festivals.

He also said the oval track's infield will be large enough to hold an outdoor professional hockey game.

“The possibility of an NHL Winter Classic has been explored,” said Tomas.

The first phase of the project involved the re-alignment of Miller's Creek – which Tomas said has been completed and that the next step of hydro seeding and planting trees will follow soon.

In 2013, the Ontario Municipal Board ruled in favour of the development but pointed out multiple properties that must be acquired by the speedway's investors from the Middle East in order for it to move forward.

Sources have told Bullet News that some of these property owners are still waiting for the sale of their property to be finalized with the project's investment group.

Tomas said there are holding provisions on these lands and that the deals are expected to be signed, once funding has been solidified for the required improvements to the site's surrounding areas.

“The investors will acquire those properties when they are satisfied that all risk has been minimized,” said Tomas.

The project also has partnerships with McMaster University and Niagara College.

The speedway component of the project makes up \$150 million of the development's \$400 million overall cost.

Niagara Falls MPP Wayne Gates said he made his position clear while campaigning for the February by-election in his riding – and also during June's provincial election. He supports the project and expects it to be a major economic boost for the entire region.

“When the speedway comes – it will create jobs for Fort Erie,” Gates said in an interview with Bullet News.

He said this one of several projects and initiatives in Fort Erie and the rest of Niagara that need the support of his colleagues at Queen's Park.

“We need to get a number of things down there to put people to work,” said Gates.

The province has committed to spending \$14 billion on infrastructure outside of Toronto and Gates said providing for these improvements is a “perfect example” of how this money should be spent.

“That's a great way to do it – fix the highways and help Fort Erie,” said Gates.

“By doing that – it's exactly what they talk about,” he added.

Ontario Minister of Economic Development Brad Duguid's office told Bullet News it is aware of an application by the local municipality for support on the project under the Small Communities Fund.

Duguid said he is excited about the economic and tourism potential the CMS could bring to Fort Erie and Niagara.

“The decision by the owners to build their project in Ontario is a vote of confidence in our province's business climate and in the region's already thriving tourism sector,” he said in a statement provided to Bullet News.

With the project currently under construction, Duguid said the province will work with the owners of the speedway and the municipality to help make sure that the local community is able to “maximize the benefits” of the project both in terms of job creation and tourism.

“We will continue to work with the owners of the speedway and the local municipality to ensure any additional improvements required by the development are provided such that the community and the province are able to benefit from the jobs and increased tourism that this exciting project has the potential to deliver,” said Duguid.