

Track gets new managers

By RAY SPITERI, REVIEW STAFF WRITER
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There are new people to help turn over a new leaf at Fort Erie Race Track.

The Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium, which took over operations at the thoroughbred horse track Jan. 1, has hired three new senior managers as part of the ongoing transition from a private-sector company to a nonprofit model.

Jim Thibert, the consortium's chief executive officer, said personnel changes are needed for the track to move forward and succeed.

"We all are aware that if we do the same as last year, we'll fail," Thibert said during a press conference Thursday morning inside the track's clubhouse.

"So, new management ... is a key goal for the (consortium)."

Thibert announced the hiring of John Whitson as racing secretary, Brian Jabelmann as property manager and housekeeping and Tom McKinnon as manager of wagering and wagering development.

All three have extensive experience in the horse racing industry.

Three managers with Nordic Gaming Corp., the previous operator of the track, will be coming over to work with the new entity.

They are Alistair Gunn as food and beverage manager and executive chef, Sue Foster as manager of human resources and Tanya Grissell-Bailey as security manager.

Two other executives, chief executive officer Bonnie Loubert and Stephen Ayers, the owner's representative, will stay with Nordic, which continues to own the track property, and other property nearby.

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They won't, however, be involved in the day-to-day operations of the consortium, as of July 1.

Thibert said Herb McGirr, who was director of racing, operations and marketing, has "decided to move on."

"Herb is a gentleman," said Thibert. "We did offer him a position with (the consortium), but he declined. He has decided to move on to some life choices of his own."

Thibert thanked Nordic for its efforts over the years, particularly through the transition period.

"They've been keeping racing going all these years, especially in 2008-09 under some extraordinarily difficult financial constraints," said Thibert.

Whitson, who spent 31 years in management at Woodbine, said he looks forward to his role as racing secretary at Fort Erie, a position he held before in the late 1970s.

"My goal is competitive racing and as large fields as we can produce because that's what people like to bet on," said Whitson, who started as a horseman.

"I hope to get good cooperation going with the trainers here that we can put the best cards on that we possibly can -- take the best advantage of the horse population we have."

McKinnon is no stranger to the Fort Erie Race Track. He started at the track selling tickets as an 18-year-old in 1971.

He went on to work in wagering, mutuels and cash handling at various race tracks.

"It's a wonderful opportunity. There's a great group of people here," said McKinnon.

"It's the biggest employer in the area. It has a wonderful history of thoroughbred racing in the province and in the country and in North America as a whole."

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Thibert called the ongoing management changes a "grueling process."

He said his selection team spent more than 600 person hours making the decisions on the six "key positions with decisions on more to come."

There are still some outstanding decisions to be made on other employee matters, including filling other management positions, which is expected to be dealt with in the coming months.