

Solution needed for track: Horwath

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Niagara Falls MPP Wayne Gates, Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath and Fort Erie Mayor Wayne Redekop at the racetrack on Tuesday.

KRIS DUBE/SPECIAL TO POSTMEDIA NEWS

The provincial government will provide the Fort Erie Race Track with another \$15.8 million over the next two seasons but a much greater commitment is needed to keep the 120-year-old border oval alive, said Ontario NDP Leader Andrea Horwath during a stop at the facility on Tuesday afternoon.

Joined by Niagara Falls NDP MPP Wayne Gates, Mayor Wayne Redekop and other officials from the town, the track and the Fort Erie Economic Development and Tourism Corp., Horwath said a long-term solution for racing in Fort Erie and the rest of the province should be a priority, in an effort to recover from the damage done by the slots program being cancelled in 2012.

"It's been a disturbing journey this track has gone through," said Horwath in a media scrum near the paddock area of the track. "What the Liberals have put horsepeople through around the province is absolutely unacceptable," she said.

A guaranteed amount of race dates favourable to the Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium (FELRC), new revenue streams, and a say in industry-wide policies through inclusion in the province's racing alliance, are a few of the things on which the local track needs a commitment from the province, said Horwath. "What we need to see is a solid plan that actually deals with the sustainability of this track," she said.

In May, the Woodbine Entertainment Group made a decision to implement a stabling policy to restrict the number of days that a horse stabled at the 'A' track in Toronto can race in Fort Erie, which is classified as a 'B' track. After pressure from Gates and local officials like Mayor Wayne Redekop, Woodbine revised the policy to say that horses could race elsewhere for two days instead of the original one day.

Horwath said it's wrong for Woodbine to dictate this change and that the government needs to give equal attention to tracks like Fort Erie, saying the track in Toronto "controls everything" in the industry. "It's unacceptable that the Liberals have created the monolith that exists at Woodbine," she said.

Gates said it's unfair that people of Fort Erie are putting their hard-earned dollars into a pool that the Fort Erie track doesn't get an equal share of, referring to a lopsided formula of who receives revenues from off-track betting. "We don't believe they should be using tax dollars to shut this place down," said Gates.

The current agreement with the province ends on March 31, 2021.

Since 2010, the track has received \$7.9 million each year from the government. In 2015, Fort Erie council agreed to give the FELRC \$500,000 in 2015, \$250,000 in 2016 and nothing in 2017.

Although Redekop supported this pattern of spending earlier this term, he spoke publicly back then that the local government should not be subsidizing a business in town, a point he reiterated on Tuesday, also agreeing with Horwath and Gates that a strategy to keep the track open for several more years is something he would like to see.

"The notion that a municipality should be putting money into any business, even if it's a non-profit organization, doesn't wash with taxpayers," he said on Tuesday.

"The slots should never have been taken out of Fort Erie," he added.

Moments after the conclusion of Tuesday's media availability in Fort Erie, the office of Ontario Minister of Finance Charles Sousa released a statement on the issue.

"The government of Ontario is committed to supporting the horseracing industry's long-term sustainability and the communities who depend on it. That's why we invest over \$100 million annually through our Horse Racing Partnership Plan," wrote Jessica Martin, senior communications advisor and press secretary for Sousa.

She also said Sousa recognizes the need for a more sustainable partnership and that he asked the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corp. to reengage with Woodbine and consider alternatives that would provide flexibility for horses to continue to ship out to Fort Erie in 2018.

"This historic track is critical to the local community and it is why Minister Sousa toured Fort Erie, with its track partners, MPP Wayne Gates and Mayor Wayne Redekop in July, to discuss a longer-term solution," says the statement.

Wilson says the direct government funding each year is \$2.2 million more than the track received under the slots program.

"In order to ensure long-term sustainability within the existing funding allocation, Minister Sousa has asked OLG to procure a consultant to undertake an independent audit of Fort Erie's financial position and to work with the racetrack to identify operational efficiencies," she said.

The slots program generated \$345 million for the horse racing industry in its final fiscal year, 2011-12. Slots revenues were divided between the tracks and horsepeople, each receiving 10 per cent, with five per cent going to host municipalities and the remainder going to the province.

Tom Valiquette, chief operating officer with the FELRC, claims wagering has been down 15 per cent for most of the season, he said at Tuesday's media event, also the last race date for the year.

This can be attributed to the stall policy.

"It's had a profound impact on us," he said.

However, attendance has been consistent in recent years and the FELRC is thankful for all the support it gets from patrons.

"At the end of the day, our fans came out and it was a good season," he said.