

New OH Track Plan Appears to Have Way to Go - BloodHorse

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 18 January 2011 13:31 -

The group planning a racetrack, casino, and resort in northeastern Ohio said Jan. 18 “everything will fall into place,” but a presentation made during a press conference indicated the project has a long way to go.

Mahoning Valley Downs & Resort,

planned by Mahoning Valley Development Group, would cost about \$300 million to build. It would feature Thoroughbred racing on a one-mile track, a hotel, live entertainment facility, restaurants, and retail shops, as well as video lottery terminals should they be implemented at Ohio racetracks.

The group clarified it has only options on about 200 acres, the location of which it will not yet identify, and options for hundreds more. It does not yet own the land.

The project was [officially announced in a Jan. 17 release](#) . The group wouldn't identify the project's financial backers but said three "SEC companies" are on board and will comment when appropriate.

The developers said they plan to pursue a racing license from the Ohio State Racing Commission. Currently there are seven tracks in Ohio; the proposed track near Youngstown would be about 50 miles from the closest ones near Cleveland: Thistledown and Northfield Park, a harness track.

Dr. Brad Pressman, one of the principals in Mahoning Valley Development Group, said the developers have been in communication with OSRC officials for about two years, have kept regulators abreast of the project, and planned to “sit down with them by the end of this week.” The idea is to get a racing license for a new track, something that hasn't been done in about 50 years in the state, he said.

“We have asked repeatedly for (a license) application that doesn't exist,” said Rick Lertzman, a partner in the project.

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OSRC chairman Willie Koester earlier in the day Jan. 18 told *The Blood-Horse* the Mahoning Valley Development Group hasn't approached the full racing commission about the project or a racing license.

"As of right now there is no meeting set (to discuss the project)," Koester said.

Details on the racing operation were hard to come by at the press conference, which was video streamed live on WKBN.com, a Youngstown-area news organization. A rendering of the project shown during the press conference includes a "clubhouse" with seating for 1,000-1,500 people, but no racing surface or barn area.

Pressman said the one-mile track would be located near the clubhouse, which would offer wagering on full-card simulcasts. The VLT casino, which does appear on the rendering, would be located adjacent to the racing facility.

"The racetrack would be a cornerstone of what we're doing here," Pressman said. "Hopefully there won't be a political fight to keep us out of the racing business. My experience has been the biggest obstacles are the ones you never see coming."

VLTs aren't legal in Ohio. Former Democratic Gov. Ted Strickland issued a 2009 directive for the Ohio Lottery to install them at racetracks, but the plan got tied up in court.

After a court challenge was vacated, Strickland never moved forward with the plan, and new Republican Gov. John Kasich said he needs time to study the issue as well as the parameters set forth for four casinos to be built in the state's four largest cities: Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, and Toledo.

Lertzman and Pressman, who in 2008 were behind a failed attempt to win constitutional approval for a full-scale casino in southwestern Ohio, said they don't know where Kasich stands on the issue but that VLTs at tracks in the state eventually will happen.

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“VLTs are going to come,” Lertzman said. “It’s not a matter of if but when.”

The principals in the project said they’ve had no discussions with the Ohio Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners. When asked if Mahoning Valley Downs would use revenue from VLTs to support racing operations, in particular purses, Lertzman said: “Probably.”

Lertzman said Strickland’s VLT directive included a plan to put money into purses; however, the directive gave racetracks 50% of the revenue and left the purse share up to negotiations with horsemen. There were indications at the time tracks wanted to contribute 2%-5% to purses, far below the national standard.

“It’s up to the state of Ohio to determine if and how much money would go from VLTs to purses,” Pressman said. “It’s something we wouldn’t have control over.”

Mahoning Valley Downs also would need a contract with horsemen, currently represented by the Ohio Horsemen’s Benevolent and Protective Association. The developers said they plan to move ahead with the racetrack and resort even if VLTs aren’t approved.

The new track would be located about 30 miles from Mountaineer Casino, Racetrack & Resort in West Virginia, and just across the Pennsylvania border from the planned Valley View Downs harness track, which also would have full-scale casino gambling.

It would be in the same market as the off-track betting parlor in New Castle, Pa., operated by The Meadows Casino & Racetrack, and roughly an hour from Presque Isle Downs & Casino near Erie, Pa.

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