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Chief among the criteria for finding a casino partner to bring to Columbus was having a commitment to community, according Tom Jackson.

Jackson, who's involved with Columbus Exposition and Racing and Convergence LLC, was the keynote speaker during the businesspersons' breakfast held by the Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce Agribusiness Committee on July 7 at Ag Park. During this time, he shared an update on the race track and casino project.

Last year, plans were announced for a Harrah's casino and a race track to be developed on the former Wishbones property located northwest of Columbus. Caesars Entertainment owns the Harrah's brand, and Convergence, LLC, is the overarching developer.

"We needed to focus on a casino operator that would give this community an opportunity to thrive and really grow," Jackson said. "One of the ... criteria we used is, they have to have a commitment to community. Commitment to community in a situation like this will only let us thrive and prosper with the opportunity that was seized."

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That commitment to Columbus was kicked off during the breakfast with CER presenting a \$500 donation to the Platte County Ag Society to go towards supporting ag and 4-H programs.

"In the future, we're going to utilize the Ag Society to funnel money dollars that we get from casino revenue back to 4-H programs," Jackson told the Telegram after the event. "We haven't started any revenue to make that bigger numbers but we hope in the future it will be closer to \$50,000 a year."

Gregg Melliger of the Platte County Ag Society board told the Telegram of his appreciation for the donation.

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“Being the Platte County Ag Society one of our focuses is to promote youth into agriculture. So something like this will probably go to a scholarship down the road for kids to pursue agricultural careers,” Melliger said. “We really appreciate them and we look forward to working with them because I think they'll be very good for the Ag Society and City of Columbus.”

Jackson told breakfast attendees that other important factors included a commitment to horse racing and a focus on the consumer with a rewards and marketing program, as well as gaming experience and an entertainment network.

“Touching nine counties around Platte County, there's about 78,000 people registered to casino gaming rewards programs. I see that as an opportunity for them to come to Columbus,” Jackson said. “If we can capture just some of those people that come here and spend money to come to the fair and do all the things that drive revenue, this community I think will prosper.”

Roughly 70,000 square feet, the building will have 500 slot machines, 25 gaming tables, a sportsbook, simulcast area and a restaurant with both indoor and outdoor seating, Jackson noted.

“They will have a very, very nice Brew Brothers menu of food that will complement food in Columbus,” he added. “We don't really want to steal away from all those other restaurants in town.”

The apron will be a focus of the new 1-mile race track.

“The biggest thing that we take away from Ag Park and horse racing over eight decades here is nobody really sits in the grandstand. If you come out, 95% of the people are on the apron,” Jackson said. “They're going to make the apron at the horse track the focal point. We get about 55% of the visitors for the horse races from outside the county so we're looking for an opportunity to capture even more.”

A Marriott brand hotel will also be on the site. Jackson added that local investors have stepped up to make the hotel happen and Caesars is on board with it. The hotel will have 102 rooms

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with meeting rooms, suites and more.

The hotel, casino and track will take up about 100 acres and there will be 35 to 40 additional acres for future growth, he said.

Jackson said officials remain optimistic for a 2023 completion date. He added he's looking forward to breaking ground in the next two to three weeks.

"Caesars is completing their application right now to submit for licenses," Jackson said. "We've worked with both the city and the county. They've been fantastic in helping us with this opportunity because the gaming revenue that comes here, the city will not only prosper from the tax revenue of the gaming but they'll also prosper from all the people that we believe will come to Columbus now."

Jackson took questions from the audience, and one attendee asked about the number of race days being planned. Jackson responded that in the next three years, officials will be building up to 15.

"The horse racing industry has struggled because of not being subsidized by other gaming opportunities so what we're looking to do is build a circuit back," he said. "Grand Island will be the front runner as they usually are. Omaha, Lincoln and South Sioux will take the summer stock slots, and then we're looking to finish in the fall. We believe there's more opportunities there."

Jackson also noted the number of Nebraska-bred horses is low. The goal, he said, is to increase horse count by running 2-year-olds; 2-year-olds haven't been run in Nebraska for many years. Having a 1-mile track and better structure is an important step in meeting that goal, he added.

About 300 people will be employed at the development, and, Jackson said, Caesars has a management team that will handle the hiring process.

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Jackson also addressed concerns he's heard in the community about potential crime that might come with having a casino in Columbus. Jackson said that Caesars will have a hand in controlling any of those situations that may come up. He added that casino representatives have already been in contact with local police and fire officials.

Breakfast attendees also asked about a temporary casino being put in place while Harrah's is being built. Jackson noted that's currently being looked into but nothing official is set, yet.

Among the other inquiries that could be heard at the event, one person asked if there would still be a local voice in the future of horse racing in Columbus. Jackson noted there absolutely will be.

"I'm pretty excited that Columbus can have something that's nice to be to be proud of," Jackson said.

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