

Location of proposed racino criticized

Opponents say Lower Coverdale site too remote, difficult to reach

TIME & TRANSCRIPT STAFF

Opponents and proponents of a proposed racino in Lower Coverdale question the choice of location, despite the potential millions of dollars in revenue promoters claim will be made.

Not in my backyard, said one opponent in attendance at an information session last night, held by representatives of Meadowvale Investments Inc., which is backing the Lower Coverdale plan.

What about the water source and disposal of sewage as well as horse manure, asked another concerned resident.

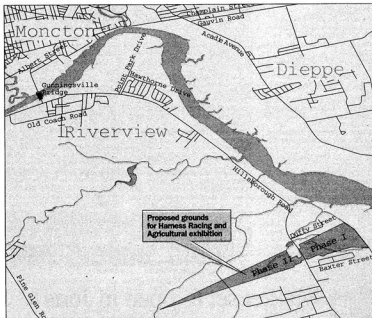
"Location, location, location," shouted another spectator who supports the idea, but not the site he says is too remote and difficult to reach.

Meadowvale held last night's meeting to highlight the importance of building a racetrack/gaming facility in this area rather than Saint John, where an active racetrack exists.

Last week, Finance Minister Jeanne Volpe said he thought Saint John was in a better position to be the first N.B. site for a racino, should the government approve one.

"The government has said that perhaps, eventually, they will get to us," said Pierre Sauvé, president of Meadowvale Investments. "We're here to say to the government, 'Why start with Saint John?'"

About 80 people, including race-horse owners and Lower Coverdale residents, filled the Lion's Senior Citizens Centre on Moncton's St. George Street to hear Sauvé outline plans for the proposed racetrack on a site off Highway 114, about 5 kilometers (3 miles) east of the Gungningsville Bridge.



Proposed grounds for Harness Racing and Agricultural exhibition

Meadowvale has sent the proposal to Premier Bernard Lord, Volpe and Atlantic Lottery Corporation for review.

Brad Dunlop of Irishtown said the harness racing track should be located closer to major access routes to cut travel costs and ease manoeuvrability of the big trucks and horse trailers.

Dunlop cited other luxurious race tracks in Canada and the United States that went under because of their location. Mess up this proposal and harness racing will die in New Brunswick, he said.

A 5/8-mile track, like the one proposed in the plan is the minimum requirement for Simulcast betting. New Brunswick's two existing tracks, in Saint John and Fredericton, are only half-mile circuits.

The real revenue for the tracks and owners is the outside betting on local races through simulcast broadcasting, Dunlop said. Revenue would also come from onsite video lottery terminals.

Sauvé should have had projection and cost figures to present the public, he added.

Sauvé's proposal is for racing one week night and on Sunday afternoons. He didn't elaborate on the operation of the track the rest of the year which would see simulcast racing and betting.

Vicky Deschênes, a spokeswoman with the province's finance department, said the government continues to review a proposal submitted by the Maritime Horse Racing Development Council for a racino, but only when a decision is made by government can the group move forward to the next stages of development.

"It's really a government decision as to whether or not they want an entertainment centre," she said.

Although he was invited to attend last night's meeting, a spokesman for Premier Bernard Lord said he would not attend.

Moncton North Liberal MLA Mike Murphy said he would support a racetrack in the Metro Moncton area, but has not displayed public support for a specific proposal.

"I've made it clear that I don't favour any particular area and that I am not backing any particular project," he said.

Ross Galbraith, chairman of the New Brunswick Horse Racing Industry Association, said the ideal situation would have all Maritime racetracks running on the same model.

"You have to look at the industry's perspective and, long term, if this is something the New Brunswick government pursues, I'd like to see it at all racetracks in New Brunswick."

He said that New Brunswick needs to follow suit with other provinces by allowing all major tracks to operate a racino-style facility.

Nonetheless, Galbraith said that if the government is looking to set up shop, Saint John might be the best location to start with.

"Saint John has the busiest track in New Brunswick — it makes sense for that site to move first," he said.

The Meadowvale proposal states the racino would bring \$7 million in revenue yearly to the Metro Moncton economy and more than \$16 million in gaming revenue in the first five years. It would also create up to 250 jobs in the region.

"They're saying that Saint John has stayed with horse racing through the good and the bad and they managed to stay open," Sauvé said. "But now their facilities are rotting. They've had their chance, now let us have ours."