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## **Anoka County harness track likely to become a reality**

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**With a key legal hurdle out of the way, a proposed harness racing track will likely become a reality, though opponents vow to continue their fight against it.**

The Minnesota Racing Commission is off and running with plans to hire an assistant executive director to oversee a controversial \$50 million harness track proposed for northeastern Anoka County.

The move comes two days after the track cleared a key legal hurdle delaying its construction.

"This is the go-ahead; there's going to be a track," said the Minnesota Racing Commission's chairwoman, Darcy Hitesman, on Thursday.

On Tuesday, the Minnesota Supreme Court declined to review a lower court's decision that confirmed the validity of a decision by the Minnesota Racing Commission to grant licenses for the track. The track, in Columbus Township, will have a spectator capacity of 1,800, and plans include a room open 24 hours for patrons to gamble on poker and other card games.

Even as track opponents vowed to throw up more legal blocks, Tom Fox, president and CFO of the primary investor Southwest Casino and Hotel Corp., said the facility that was first proposed in late 2003 is expected to open in the fall of 2007. The firm is seeking bids from contractors, and construction could begin in September or October.

"We're ready," Fox said. "We've been ready."

Hitesman said, "They have a plan of operation that's been submitted and approved. They have financial backers who have very successful track records in gambling who have looked at this very carefully.

Hitesman added, "They could have invested anywhere but chose to open here. It's going."

On Wednesday, Debra Davies, treasurer of the Columbus Concerned Citizens group, said the organization hasn't given up and is looking at other options for blocking the project.

Among those options is a request for the state Supreme Court to review another lower court decision from a different lawsuit involving the track. That suit deals with whether the Racing Commission violated state open meeting laws when it voted to reconsider granting a racing license to the North Metro Harness Initiative in November 2004.

Others, though, believe the facility is on track to begin construction, as its promoters have said.

"It sure sounds positive," said Greg Budach, secretary-treasurer of the nonprofit Minnesota Harness Racing Inc., a group created to promote harness racing. "And having the card club will make it viable."

### **Uncertain future?**

Fox said the track will likely be open on weekends and on one or two weekdays. There will be seating for spectators inside and out to watch the horses trot around the 5/8-of-a-mile oval.

During its inaugural season, expected in the fall of 2007, there will likely be 50 race days, Fox said. Officials are evaluating whether the races would be run year-round.

Fox said costs of the facility have gone up with all the delays. Fox said its price tag is now "in the ballpark" of \$50 million. Fox said no public money will be needed for its construction; private investors are ponying up the whole amount.

Even if built, the track's future could be uncertain, according to some.

Canterbury Park in Shakopee, with no debt, made slightly more than \$3 million last year, said Tom Metzen, president of the Minnesota affiliate of the Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association. Metzen wondered whether a new park, after investing nearly \$50 million and paying interest on loans, can possibly make it.

"If they can, God bless them, but I'm glad it's not my money being invested," Metzen said.

Canterbury owner Randy Sampson said he wonders whether the Twin Cities market can support two tracks, particularly if live racing dates overlap during Minnesota's relatively short season.

"Using the developer's own statistics, a harness track will never make a penny," said Don Steinke, a Columbus Township farmer who has helped lead the petition against the track. "The only thing that can make money is the card room.

"I'm not against horse racing, but I am against gambling," Steinke said. "We don't need it in Forest Lake," he said, referring to the area adjacent to the township.

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