

# Casino Rumor is 'Non-Issue'

## *Downs backers try to assuage fears about track relocation plan*

By Larry O'Connor



A half-mile harness race track and three-story grandstand seating 480 spectators is the centerpiece of the proposed Northville Downs at Plymouth Township. Courtesy of Plymouth Township

**N**orthville Downs' proposed move will boost Plymouth Township's fortunes and breathe life into a fading sport, backers say.

Detractors paint a less glamorous picture.

They contend a harness racetrack planned for the southwest corner of Five Mile and Ridge roads will only bring traffic headaches, if not a crime spike. A few naysayers assert the development is nothing but a backdoor to open a casino.

Don't bet on the latter, township attorney Kevin Bennett retorts.

The attorney outlined several reasons why erecting a gambling house on the 128-acre site would be impossible under state law. Bennett spoke during a June 1 planning commission special meeting at Plymouth Township hall.

At the special session, commissioners voted to send the planned unit development site plan to the township board of trustees for final approval. The elected seven-member body will take up the matter sometime this summer.

A half-mile harness race track and three-story grandstand seating 480 spectators is the centerpiece of the proposed Northville Downs at Plymouth Township.

The raceway would open spring 2024 and host live events from May to September, said John Carlo, Northville Downs' owner and director of operations. Auburn Hills-based PEA Group is representing the track owner during the PUD process.

To torpedo casino scuttlebutt, Bennett recited state gambling laws.

A gaming house would require statewide voter approval and local backing at the polls, Bennett said.

Another state regulation restricts gambling facilities to cities with a population of 800,000 or more. Plymouth Township has 27,938 residents, according to 2020 U.S. Census figures.

"It's a nonissue," Bennett said.

Despite those assurances, some residents refused to let go of the conspiracy theory at the public meeting.

A few suggested a Native American tribe could buy into the project and open a gambling house.

Bennett said Indian-run casinos are limited to federally designated tribal lands. No Native American reservations exist in southeast Michigan, the township attorney added.

"We really need to put this to bed," said Bob Doroshewitz, planning trustee who joined six colleagues in unanimously approving the PUD site plan. "This myth out there about a 56,000-square-foot casino is total nonsense."

Those spreading rumors either don't know the law or have a political agenda, said Kurt Heise, township supervisor.

"I guess I'm just going to have to say it one more time: The casino is virtually impossible under the state constitution," Heise said.

During the project's unveiling in January, a proposed 53,800-square-foot gaming facility was listed as part of a "future phase." Those plans were later scrapped, Heise said.

Along with the track and grandstand, the Northville Downs proposal includes a 35,500-square-foot horse barn, a 23,000-square-foot racing structure, and a 3,200-square-

foot maintenance building.

"There's no second phase," Heise said. "When you are going through the planned unit development process, there are always drafts that are flying back and forth."

If the track owner makes any site plan revisions, the multistep PUD process would start over, the township supervisor said.

Casinos aside, nearby residents are worried about the project bringing traffic headaches and unsavory visitors.

"It's a nice site plan, it's got a lot of nice features," said Howard Hamerick, who lives near the proposed horse track. "The question is: How do you get there and how do you get out?"

Another resident recalled being less than impressed with the clientele during a Northville Downs visit a few years ago.

"I'm just going to say it: There were a lot of degenerates that were in that building," said George Maitland, who lives in the Andover Lakes subdivision.

That observation didn't mesh with the township police chief's findings.

During a Feb. 15 planning commission meeting, Police Chief James Knittel said he spoke to Northville law enforcement officials about the raceway whose current 48-acre site is expected to undergo a sweeping \$113 million redevelopment.

City of Northville Police Chief Alan Maciag and Capt. Greg Hannewald informed their Plymouth Township counterpart crime is not a problem at the historic racetrack, Knittel said. Northville Downs opened in 1944 and is the state's last harness remaining venue.

Aside from Kentucky Derby day, which attracts a lot of visitors to the Downs, the existing facility doesn't require additional patrols, Knittel added. Northville Downs also hosts off-track betting.



"Generally, the type of clientele that goes to the track are senior citizens," the police chief said.

The sports facility's addition is also not expected to create nightmare gridlock, a traffic impact study suggested.

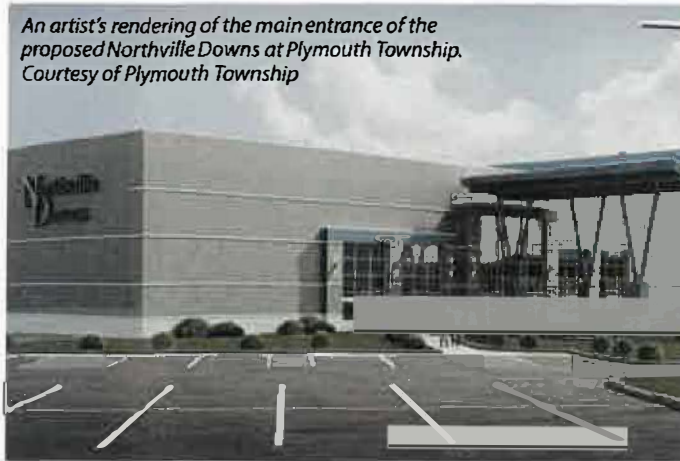
An analysis by Detroit-based Fishbeck predicts the raceway will generate 288 additional vehicle trips on weekdays. That figure is about a tenth of the estimated 2,077 trips a manufacturing site would create.

The once-proposed 5 Ridge Corporate Park was expected to house eight businesses.

The former Detroit House of Correction site is designated for industrial use but was expected to be rezoned as technology and research under the township's 2025 Master Plan. A swath along Johnson's Creek is classified as public land.

Harness race events are also not expected to coincide with the

*An artist's rendering of the main entrance of the proposed Northville Downs at Plymouth Township. Courtesy of Plymouth Township*



4-6 p.m. peak weekday traffic period.

The proposed harness racing venue "will not have a significant impact on current traffic conditions on Ridge Road and Five Mile Road," said Kyle Basset, Spalding DeDecker project manager, in a report to the planning commission.

The track's arrival will pump more money into the

township. The municipality's share of breakage fees—pennies accumulated from rounding down betting payouts to the nearest dime—could reach \$250,000-\$300,000 annually, Heise said. That figure doesn't include anticipated tax revenue.

Other perks will be outlined in a yet-negotiated community benefit agreement, which is included in the PUD process.

Soccer fields and pickleball courts highlight the plan's recreational amenities.

Under a shared services agreement, youth soccer's Plymouth Reign will manage three fields planned within the half-mile track's infield.

Likewise, a community organizer will oversee eight pickleball courts, Carlo said. The courts are part of a "flex space" planned outside the racing building. That area can be easily reconfigured for other events such as 3-on-3 basketball tournaments.

The track's owner assured planning commissioners that township residents will be able to play the increasingly popular paddle sport at the proposed facility.

"I don't think our goal was to ever exclude anybody from pickleball," Carlo said, "but have someone control it like the soccer fields."



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