



## **IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL NASCAR COME TO LONG ISLAND?**

### **80,000-Seat Facility On The Table**

Josh Stewart 03/13/2007 5:04 pm

You don't erect an 80,000-seat motorsports facility for a Saturday-night enduro feature. So as long as those spearheading the Enterprise Park at Calverton (EPCAL) Centre project are talking about building a track that size, local NASCAR fans can at least dream of someday hosting the Nextel Cup's finest.

On March 9, RexCorp Realty, in partnership with Long Island Destination Group LLC, released plans for a \$1 billion entertainment complex at the former Grumman air runway and testing facility, provided that the Town of Riverhead agrees to sell the property and green-light the project. The plan includes a 1/4-mile track for local weekly events—similar to what takes place at nearby Riverhead Raceway—and a 3/4-mile track.

The project would also feature a large equestrian center; a 15,000-seat amphitheater; an 8,000- to 9,000-seat indoor arena; and a family entertainment resort, featuring two hotels and amusement park-like activities.

The proposed tracks have no connection to the NASCAR-affiliated International Speedway Corporation (ISC), whose attempt to build a track in Staten Island was scrapped last December amid fierce opposition from residents.

Michael Manna, the lead designer for the project, says that while NASCAR is not officially involved, the sport's governing body has "been spoken to in quiet ways" about the EPCAL Centre.

"If you want to attract a franchise [like NASCAR], you need the kind of facility that will give you that opportunity," says Manna, a partner and director of design with the Spector Group in North Hills.

He adds that the racing facility can be built in phases to eventually reach the 80,000 number. That jibes with the interpretation of Riverhead Supervisor Phil Cardinale, who says it was explained to him that the initial track capacity would be 20,000, and would be expanded only if it were awarded a top-tier race date by NASCAR.

Similar to the Staten Island effort, the main hurdle will be not the cars on the track, but those trying to get to the track. Michael Printup, who was in charge of ISC's Staten Island

project, says that his company looked at Long Island around eight years ago, but it wasn't considered as a target site due to its "bottleneck of traffic."

Supervisor Cardinale adds, "I am skeptical that without direct access to the Long Island Expressway that something like this can be managed."

But Michael Frank, RexCorp's senior vice president of development and design, cites the U.S. Open at Shinnecock Hills as an example of how it is possible to hold events of this scale if the proper traffic management plan is put in place. More importantly, he maintains that Long Island's rank and file want NASCAR. Unlike Staten Island, that may make the populace more understanding of a few traffic headaches.

"We know there are a lot of people on Long Island who have to travel out of state to watch NASCAR," says Frank, mentioning market research that attests to the sport's popularity on LI. "It is a huge audience, and we'd like to accommodate them."

ISC's Printup says that his company doesn't have any specific targets in the tristate area at the moment, as it is still in the process of selling the property it bought in Staten Island. But this past weekend in Las Vegas, NASCAR CEO/Chairman Brian France told reporters that the New York area, along with Denver and Washington State, are "in play" as far as NASCAR's future goes.

Considering the ill will for ISC left in the wake of the Staten Island failure—which included a community meeting that turned into a shouting/shoving match and forced police to call in backup—it's not a stretch to envision NASCAR sitting back and letting an outside entity try to navigate what could be a political and logistical minefield. Cardinale envisions about a month of preliminary discussions involving the Riverhead Town Board, and if the board wishes to entertain selling the Grumman property, a three- to six-month negotiation process.

NASCAR in the past has focused on parts of the New York area where it can still race close to Gotham's skyline. But Frank contends that NASCAR can still get the push it desires in Suffolk County.

"When they have the U.S. Open at Shinnecock, you still have the blimp shot of the [Manhattan] skyline," Frank says. "We don't feel we would lose that New York market by being out in Riverhead."