

'Baltimore Grand Prix' could start in 2011 - Group in talks with city, series about event starting in 2011

By Jeff Barker, *Baltimore Sun*, July 7, 2009

A Baltimore group is in serious negotiations with the city and the IndyCar Series about staging an annual street race beginning in 2011 near the Inner Harbor that state and city officials say could rival the Preakness in its economic impact and national exposure.

Baltimore Racing Development, a limited liability company, is proposing five years of what it calls a "Baltimore Grand Prix" beginning in the late summer or early fall of 2011. BRD has been meeting with city and state officials - including representatives of Mayor Sheila Dixon - and with the Indy Racing League's IndyCar Series.

The race would be patterned in part after IndyCar Series street races in Toronto; St. Petersburg, Fla.; and Long Beach, Calif.

A feasibility study obtained by The Baltimore Sun says the race and related events could have an economic impact of as much as \$100 million. By comparison, the Preakness is estimated to have a \$60 million impact. The horse race is the state's largest annual sporting event and helps support Maryland's thoroughbred industry for the rest of the year.

"BRD projects that the [auto] event would bring more than 150,000 visitors to Baltimore and generate as much as \$100 million over the four days, based on such visitors spending on hotel nights, meals, tickets and other purchases," according to the feasibility study.

BRD said Dixon asked it to provide the feasibility study. A Dixon spokesman, Ian Brennan, said no decision has been made by the mayor's office about the race.

"We have had interest from the producers of two racing events. The concept is intriguing," said Brennan, who declined to identify the other event. "Racing cars through the streets of downtown Baltimore raises numerous questions which still need to be answered."

The event would be held over four days and would likely include go-kart races, concerts and other activities, said Jay Davidson, a Baltimore attorney who is the chief operating officer of BRD. A series of preliminary races would occur before the main event on the final day.

Maryland's interest is serious enough that Terry Hasseltine, director of the state's office of sports marketing, traveled to St. Petersburg in April to observe the "Streets of St. Petersburg" race.

"The stands were packed around every corner. People were just buzzing throughout the area," Hasseltine said. "There had to be at least 110,000 on that final day."

Hasseltine said the Baltimore event could draw 40,000 to 70,000 people a day before the final race. By comparison, he said, "The Preakness is a one-day activity."

The race plans cannot be finalized until the city, BRD and IndyCar officials agree. Davidson said BRD was working on noise and traffic management studies for the city that could be completed within about a month.

"We have to have our homework done to see how noise is handled, how street closures are handled and the economics of it all. Then we have to have the right date," Hasseltine said. "We want to be the Indy 500 of the street course. They start off at the unofficial beginning of summer, and this could be the end of summer on Labor Day weekend. We are throwing out a couple different dates."

The proposed race course would send the open-wheel racing cars along parts of Pratt, Light, Conway, Camden and Russell streets. The course would veer near the Maryland Science Center and past Oriole Park at Camden Yards.

The course would be about 2.4 miles long with the pit area adjacent to Camden Yards, according to the feasibility study.

Among the consultants working to bring the race to Baltimore is two-time Indianapolis 500 winner Al Unser Jr.

Unser, who is also a driver coach for the Indy Racing League, said the Inner Harbor would be a scenic backdrop and that the event could attract racing fans from Washington, Philadelphia and New York.

"I'd kind of like to call it [Baltimore] our East Coast Long Beach," Unser said. "Long Beach just had their 35th annual [street race]. I really feel this is going to be a long-term win-win situation."

Bill Cole, a City Council member who represents the race area, said the race could have "a greater economic impact than the Preakness and would give Baltimore City four hours of television coverage on a national network. I think the hotel demand is greater than the Preakness."

Added Cole: "My primary concern would be the impact on residential neighborhoods that are near the route. I would live maybe 200 yards from where the cars would come down in the proposed route. They can mitigate it. Some of it is just sound buffering."

John Griffin, a spokesman for the IndyCar Series, said talks with BRD are continuing. "There is still so much that has to be done," Griffin said. "But I think we've seen a lot of energy and a lot of motivation" from BRD, he said.