

Indy race could come to city in 2011 - Event's fate is 'on our end,' organizers say

By Sandra McKee, *Baltimore Sun*, August 18, 2009

The Baltimore Racing Development group proposing an Indy Racing League event said yesterday that if all goes according to plan, the city would have its own Grand Prix IndyCar event running on a street course through the Inner Harbor on Labor Day weekend 2011.

"Given what our communications have been with the IRL, I would say [whether or not the race comes here] is on our end," said Jay Davidson, BRD's chief operating officer, during a news conference at the Sports Legends Museum at Camden Yards. "If we can provide the track and the date, they will come."

The oldest race in motor sports, the Indianapolis 500, begins the summer IRL season on Memorial Day. Davidson said the Baltimore race - which would feature those same open-wheel cars traveling close to 200 mph - would end the summer season on the proposed 2.4-mile street course here as part of a three-day festival.

This, of course, is not a new idea. The first proposal for such a race came during Mayor William Donald Schaefer's administration in the mid-1980s. Back then, many of the same arguments were made for the event: It would draw a huge crowd, and the economic impact from direct and indirect sources would be in the millions.

But that proposal, like many others for auto racing events in the city and elsewhere around the state, stalled. That first one didn't succeed, former Schaefer press secretary Pat Bernstein said, "because we couldn't get the state legislature to give us variance to have cars running on downtown streets over 30 miles per hour."

Others screeched to a halt because of the costs of capital improvements and noise concerns.

Will this one be different?

A BRD spokesman initially said yesterday that the organization was unaware a speed limit could be a problem, but later added, "The IRL, BRD and the city have been doing traffic assessments for some time, and we don't anticipate any state issues. The course will be on all city streets."

There are other signs that this race proposal could be different.

Although the city has not yet determined to move forward, the race proposal was given substance by a unanimous City Council resolution passed Aug. 10 that gives the BRD group exclusive rights for two years to pursue bringing an IRL race to Baltimore. The

group is also in the unusual position of having the president of the IRL's commercial division publicly express its interest in coming to the city.

And yesterday, two-time Indianapolis 500 winner Al Unser Jr., now an IRL driving coach and BRD consultant, said the IRL is looking at Baltimore "as the East Coast Long Beach Grand Prix," which has been bringing millions of dollars to that California community for 35 years.

The IRL is "doing everything they can to assist," Unser said. "And they're very impressed by how BRD has done its homework."

BRD has already begun noise, traffic and economic impact and infrastructure studies, which Davidson said is putting it well ahead of other cities such as Cleveland, Boston and Houston, which are also in the hunt for a 2011 racing date.

City Councilman William H. Cole IV, who represents the 11th District, which would feel the direct impact of the proposed racecourse, said he lives within 200 feet of the planned track and has been impressed by BRD's early outreach efforts. He said he has also been surprised by the responses he has heard from his constituents.

"The positive response has shocked me," Cole said. "People seem to see the positive economic impact it could have on the city and they say, 'We've lived through Ravens Stadium 11 weekends a year, which is really loud. We can live through this for one weekend.' I've had only one person contact me about the noise."

BRD has already met with the involved community association presidents and plans to meet one-on-one with each association beginning next month.

"Things worry me every day," Davidson said. "This is like putting together a big development project. But the one thing we really need to be aware of and handle right is our contact with the local communities. Some places that did not succeed [in getting or having successful events] didn't communicate with local residents."

The other major issue is infrastructure. BRD had said private investors would pay for barriers, fencing, grandstands and other equipment with money they would hope to recoup from ticket and sponsorship sales. Such things as street repairs necessary for the racecourse and police and safety equipment are usually financed by the host city.

City Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake said road repairs on much of the proposed course, which includes Russell Street, Pratt Street, Key Highway and Light Street, have already been approved and will "dovetail" with the timing of the race.

"Sometimes the stars are aligned," Rawlings-Blake said. "They have to be. At this time, we have the right administration in the city and the State House and an economic development team that sees the benefits and importance of having major events like this. ... There are obstacles, but I know they're not insurmountable."