

Baltimore hopes to land IRL event

Tim Lemke, *The Washington Times*, August 18, 2009

The speed limit in parts of Baltimore could be temporarily waived under a new plan to bring an open-wheel street race around the city's Inner Harbor.

Officials from the fledgling organization Baltimore Racing Development revealed details Monday of an effort to land an Indy Racing League event in the summer of 2011. The race would feature cars speeding around a 2.4-mile track in the shadow of Oriole Park and the Maryland Science Center.

BRD officials said the Baltimore Grand Prix would bring between \$60 million and \$100 million in direct and indirect economic impact to the city, given attendance of 150,000 and the addition of 400 workers. The projections are estimates based on figures published by Grand Prix races in other cities, including Detroit and Toronto.

If the race is approved, Baltimore could be home to the only IRL race on the East Coast north of Florida. The league announced last month that it would not return to Richmond International Raceway.

"We'll be looking to Washington, D.C., and Richmond to the south and Philadelphia, New York and all the way up into Boston to the north," said Terry Hasseltine, director of the Maryland Office of Sports Marketing, which is working with BRD on the proposal. "This destination, with our Inner Harbor, with our stadiums... lead to a very conducive environment to reach the numbers we're talking about."

BRD was formed earlier this year to bid for the race and work with the city on traffic and noise abatement. The group hired MJ Promotions, which has run events in Houston and Australia, to promote the race as part of a three-day festival in the city.

On Aug. 10, the Baltimore City Council approved a resolution giving BRD the exclusive right for two years to pursue bringing a race to the city. Mayor Sheila Dixon issued a statement Monday calling the race a "terrific opportunity to introduce Baltimore to thousands of new visitors" but said the city must weigh the costs of holding the event against potential economic benefits.

BRD officials said they hope to raise at least \$10 million in sponsorships and that have just started reaching out to the business community.

"The reaction we've had so far has been very positive," chief operating officer James Davidson said. "You're talking about 150,000 people, and it's the idea of sort of being associated with something unique."

Infrastructure upgrades would be the responsibility of the city, and BRD is working to form estimates of that potential cost. City officials said many of the needed road upgrades

have been programmed as part of future budgets, though they privately cautioned that an uncertain economy could make it hard to guarantee such money will be available.

The IRL has endorsed BRD's efforts to land the event, though it will not make a decision about a new race for 2011 until April. Two-time Indianapolis 500 winner Al Unser Jr. joined BRD as a league liaison.

"They've done their homework," Unser said. "They're thinking about the future and the impact it's going to have on the city and the state and all areas. They truly have thought of everything. ... The IRL is very impressed with what's going on."

There is still much work to be done. Officials are still meeting with residents of the surrounding neighborhood and must perform studies to determine how to handle noise and traffic. The District held a Grand Prix in the American Le Mans Series on a street track near RFK Stadium in 2001, but plans for future races were canceled after complaints from residents about noise.

Baltimore City Council member William H. Cole IV, who represents the district where the race would be held, said he is confident the event will have strong community support because residents are accustomed to noise and disruptions from games at M&T Bank Stadium and Oriole Park.

"I've received probably 150 to 200 phone calls from people in the affected neighborhoods saying, 'This is awesome; let's go for it,' " Cole said. "And I've received one that said, 'No way.' ... We're conditioned because we live around the stadiums; we understand that noise is a part of it. But I will work closely to ensure we mitigate the noise as much as possible."