

Baltimore Grand Prix plan approved

Brent Jones, *Baltimore Sun*, May 6, 2010

By the end of this month, Baltimore transportation workers will start preparing downtown roads for a world-class motorsports event expected to bring hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue to the area.

The city Board of Estimates signed off on a five-year contract Wednesday with Baltimore Racing Development Corp., which is expected to land a deal with the Indy Racing League to be a stop on the circuit in August 2011. City officials say the work on the streets will be minimally intrusive but will take more than a year to complete.

A loop of streets surrounding the Inner Harbor, including Pratt and Russell streets, will compose the 2.4-mile racetrack, providing what organizers say will be a breathtaking view of the city for the world to see.

Martyn Thake, owner of Motorsports Consulting Services, will design the track and is confident that the well-worn streets can handle cars approaching 200 miles per hour.

"Preparing the roads will be an ongoing process," Thake said. "As far as building the racetrack, we're probably looking at four weeks to build it."

Thake said 90 percent of the needed roadwork will involve repaving. Transportation officials are expected to close lanes rather than entire streets. Washington Street is the only road that will need to be widened, Thake said.

"We have acceptable width, but we don't have acceptable smoothness," he said.

The city is dedicating \$5 million in federal road maintenance funds to the racing project and is requesting a \$2.75 million state loan for related improvements.

At a news conference, Mayor Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake and others hailed the race as an event that will bring a flood of money and visitors, while putting Baltimore on a worldwide stage.

"This, my friends, is what we call a game-changer," Rawlings-Blake said.

The race is expected to bring an estimated \$250 million to the city through ticket sales, hotel stays and restaurant business over the five years as well as \$11 million in direct tax revenue.

If selected by the Indy Racing League, Baltimore would join Toronto, Long Beach, Calif., and Sao Paulo, Brazil, as Indy Racing sites. The circuit tends to bring thousands of visitors to cities. Baltimore is expecting about 100,000 spectators for the annual three-day event.

City officials will build about 50,000 temporary grandstand seats around the track and sell general admission seats at M&T Bank Stadium, where the race will be shown on the replay board.

Councilman William H. Cole IV, a chief proponent of the Baltimore race, acknowledged that the races can be noisy but said he has sought community input since discussions began about the project two years ago.

Community groups in Otterbein, Ridgely's Delight and Federal Hill have submitted letters to the city in support of the deal.

"It puts this city on the map for all the right reasons," Cole said. He later added, "I'm a former community association president down there. Knowing what we deal with in Orioles and Ravens and all the special events we have around there, this is just one more thing. The difference is, we were going to the community first, rather than last."