

Street racing meets mixed results

By Julie Scharper, *The Baltimore Sun*, June 1, 2010

Joined by some of the nation's most famous drivers, Gov. Martin O'Malley and Mayor Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake will announce a deal Wednesday to bring high-speed racing to the streets of Downtown Baltimore with an annual event that officials say will draw more than 100,000 visitors to the city and generate hundreds of millions of dollars in ticket sales, hotel stays and restaurant meals.

But a survey of North American cities that have hosted similar events reveals a mixed record. A few — Long Beach, Calif., St. Petersburg, Fla., and Toronto — have made themselves into international destinations for motor sports. But others, including nearby Washington, have canceled races amid complaints from residents, revenues that failed to materialize and disputes between promoters and city leaders.

Councilman William H. Cole IV, who represents the downtown area and has been one of the race's chief advocates, is confident that the racing festival will be a victory for Baltimore.

"There's nothing else like this race in the region right now," said Cole. "It's really filling a void. And the event itself is being run through our sports district as well as our major tourist area. We have more hotel rooms on the race route than other major city does."

Racing stars Al Unser Jr. and Graham Rahal are expected to join O'Malley and Rawlings-Blake at the Baltimore Convention Center this morning to announce the Baltimore Grand Prix. The city, Baltimore Racing Development and the Indy Racing League have agreed to launch the race in August 2011, with plans to return in each of the next four years.

The three-day event would include a series of races leading up to an IRL-sanctioned contest on a 2.4-mile loop coursing through the city. Open-wheel cars would roar up Pratt Street, along the Inner Harbor and around Camden Yards, where a pit stop area would be located.

Baltimore Racing Development would pay the IRL about \$2 million annually to host the event and would share in the profits from ticket sales. The Baltimore group would pay the city an annual fee of \$250,000 and share a percentage of profits.

Under the terms of the deal, Baltimore Racing Development will spend about \$14 million to ready the city for the race. The group is planning to solicit corporate sponsors for concrete and metal barriers to protect bystanders along the course. The city, meanwhile, will spend \$7.75 million in state and federal money to prepare the roads.

City leaders are planning monthly meetings with community groups to work through concerns about noise and traffic, Cole said. And he said officials with the IRL have made clear their commitment to making the race a success in Baltimore.

Cole and Rawlings-Blake traveled to Indianapolis last weekend to view the 94th Indianapolis 500 and meet with IRL officials. Cole has also attended the Long Beach race.

The IRL was founded about 15 years ago, with initial races on oval tracks. The league started adding street races in 2005.

Long Beach has been a success story. The race there dates back to 1975 and became part of the IndyCar series last year. The lengthy history ensures residents are prepared for the race, said Chris Esslinger, a spokesman for the Grand Prix Association of Long Beach. "We've been able to market ourselves as a tradition," he said, adding that event includes concerts, children's activities and other events and attracts a broad variety of spectators, not just hard-core racing fans.

Building the track takes about nine weeks, although roads do not entirely close until the race day, he said. Residents who want to skip town for the race are ferried on the zoo or outlets malls on bus trips organized by the racing association, he said.

But other cities have not been so successful. Washington signed a 10-year contract with a racing company not affiliated with Indy and spent \$5.1 million in 2002 to build a track near RFK Stadium. But, despite drawing 70,000 spectators, the race was shelved after the first year after noise complaints.

An IndyCar race was run for several years on an oval track outside Richmond, Va., but organizers pulled the plug on it last year because of flagging ticket sales. A spokeswoman for the track said area NASCAR fans wanted more excitement than the "parade"-like feel of the Indy race that involves less passing.

In San Jose, Calif., a street race sponsored by Champ Car, which merged with Indy in 2008, ran for three years before being canned in 2007. City leaders pulled funding to the race after budget problems concerns about transparency, said Tom Manheim, a spokesman for the San Jose city manager.

The thought of running a high-speed race around the Inner Harbor has been around for more than 20 years. Then-Mayor William Donald Schaefer commissioned a few feasibility studies in the late 1980s, but the idea never took off. But a few years after that, the Inner Harbor did play host to another automobile event, the Concours d'Elegance, a show of Porsches, Ferraris and other world-class cars.

But despite reasonably priced tickets, event organizer Lee Raskin said, the car show did not attract large crowds.

"The bottom line is the community didn't embrace this," said Raskin, a local developer. "This community isn't motor sport-oriented. It never has been."