

Baltimore Grand Prix moved to Labor Day weekend 2011 - Organizers, officials say shift in date will boost attendance

By Julie Scharper, *The Baltimore Sun*, August 16, 2010

City officials and organizers have moved Baltimore's inaugural Grand Prix to the long Labor Day weekend next year, which they say will draw larger crowds and cause fewer hassles than the August date for which the event was originally planned.

"We really want people to be able to come to this for the full three days, and not just for the Sunday race," said Baltimore Racing Development president Jay Davidson, who announced the date change Monday. "This makes it marketable as an entire weekend in Baltimore City."

Organizers also have changed the race course, which now runs around rather than simply past Oriole Park at Camden Yards; introduced a pit area outside the baseball stadium and moved the paddock area indoors.

City officials had long been angling to host the racing festival — which includes an expo, children's events and a series of smaller speed contests — over the long weekend, but initially scheduled it for the first weekend in August because of potential conflicts with Orioles and Ravens games.

Officials said the race now was poised to attract more than the 100,000 spectators and garner more than the \$65 million in economic benefits originally anticipated.

"It's really helpful that it's happening on a holiday weekend," said City Councilman William H. Cole IV, who represents the downtown area and has been one of the race's most vocal backers. "It makes the travel a little easier and the hotels may be able to translate it into an extra night's stay."

Cole said Labor Day weekend was traditionally a bleak time for city tourism. And those who don't make the trek to Baltimore might be more likely to watch the races on television.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake said she was thankful the city was able to score the choice dates for the race.

"Labor Day Weekend will provide another full day for racing fans to enjoy all that Baltimore has to offer and with any luck, slightly cooler temperatures," she said in a statement.

Baltimore Racing Development's team of local investors is negotiating deals with corporate sponsors and is looking to land a second race, the American Le Mans Series, Davidson said.

Organizers have shortened the course and cut out a hairpin turn that would have veered near M&T Bank Stadium, reducing concerns that race preparations would have interfered with traffic for the Ravens' final preseason game, scheduled for the evening before the race kicks off.

The paddock area — where mechanics tinker with the open-wheeled cars — will be housed in the first floor of the Baltimore Convention Center, freeing roadside space and enabling visitors to inspect the vehicles in an air-conditioned space, officials announced Monday.

And the pit row will run along the east side of Camden Yards, highlighting the historic B&O Warehouse in television coverage.

The changes will "enhance the race for everyone," said track designer Martyn Thake, who plotted the course.

Cars will whip by fans more frequently on the shortened course and the addition of some wider turns will "keep the cars bunched up a little more and provide more opportunities for passing," Thake said.

The shorter course will save the city about \$2 million in road construction costs, city officials said. They had dedicated \$7.5 million in state and federal funds for work on the course — which includes portions of Pratt, West Conway and Russell streets — but awarded a \$5.5 million contract to P. Flanigan & Sons for the work.

Underground utilities, including steam tunnels and water mains, will also require extensive work before the race. Work has already begun on Pratt Street, to the chagrin of commuters mired in gridlock as traffic is funneled into two lanes there.

"We've been hearing some frustration, which is understandable, but the city has been responsive," said Kirby Fowler, head of the Downtown Partnership.

Following complaints, contractors have ceased parking in travel lanes and a strip of parking spots has been opened up on Baltimore Street, Fowler said. He urged residents and commuters to contact his office with concerns.

"We want people to call in to report these unnecessary disruptions," he said. "We're finding for the most part then when we reach out, people are willing to work with the city."

City officials signed a deal in the spring with the Indy Racing League to host the Grand Prix for five years, but there is no guarantee the festival will continue to be held over the Labor Day weekend.

Under the deal, Baltimore Racing Development, a private company, will invest about \$14 million in race preparation and pay the racing league \$2 million each year.

The local company would share ticket sales proceeds with the racing league and would pay the city \$250,000 and a percentage of the profits each year.