

University of Maryland to close for Grand Prix race Law, medical schools cancel classes but hospital to stay open

By Julie Scharper, *The Baltimore Sun*, June 6, 2011

The University of Maryland will close its downtown campus for three days because of the Baltimore Grand Prix auto race, and medical staffers are drawing up plans to care for patients as nearby streets are transformed into a high-speed raceway over the Labor Day weekend.

Patients are being asked to postpone elective surgeries, some clinics will be closed and classes will be canceled for the Grand Prix — whose open-wheeled cars will race at speeds approaching 190 mph. Some medical staffers will stay at nearby hotels so they won't be caught in traffic snarls on their way to the hospital, officials said.

"These are very, very loud cars, and the congestion is going to be occurring within one block of our campus," said spokesman Ed Fishel. "This is just the smart thing to do."

The race has also sparked changes in the plans of some downtown workers, commuters — and antiques buyers.

A stretch of downtown streets was shut down Monday for road construction for the raceway — a taste of the many closures that the three-day racing festival will necessitate. A preliminary plan calls for several streets around the Inner Harbor to close in the days preceding the race, and for MARC train and light rail passengers to be rerouted over the long weekend.

Several downtown businesses are asking employees to work from home on the Friday that marks the start of the festival, while others plan to host parties for staffers in offices overlooking the course, said Downtown Partnership President Kirby Fowler.

"The race weekend is one of the slower weekends in the city," he said. "Some businesses might be adversely affected, but for the most part, the Friday before Labor Day weekend tends to be a very slow day."

Councilman William H. Cole IV, who said the festival will be an economic boon to Baltimore, stressed that workers will still be able to enter office buildings during the race and that most parking lots will be open.

"There is no scenario where we have asked people not to open," said Cole, whose district includes the downtown area and who is one of the Grand Prix's most vocal supporters. "There is nothing about this that will make businesses inaccessible."

According to a draft of traffic plans, portions of Pratt, Howard and Russell streets would close on the Wednesday before the race. Those plans and a preliminary 160-page traffic

management report, which had been posted on the University of Maryland's website, were removed following inquiries from The Baltimore Sun on Monday.

Jay Davidson, president of Baltimore Racing Development, the race organizer, said those traffic plans were preliminary and should be made final next week.

Ryan O'Doherty, a spokesman for Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, said the city would release the plans in the next few weeks.

Race organizers said that crews would start building jersey walls and other barriers along the track — which includes portions of Pratt, Light, Russell and Conway streets — in late July, but the construction would not have a major effect on traffic.

"The work will be done by [experienced] contractors mostly working at night," said Davidson. "It shouldn't have an impact on traffic during the daytime."

The race has prompted the rescheduling of at least one Baltimore tradition. Organizers of the Baltimore Summer Antiques Show decided to move the event, held at the Baltimore Convention Center, to the weekend before the Grand Prix. In previous years, the show was held over the Labor Day weekend.

"I believe the weekend before Labor Day is an improvement for our show," said Scott Diament, president of the Palm Beach Show Group. "High-end buyers tend to have houses in places like Aspen or Nantucket, and they spend Labor Day there with their families. The chances of getting those buyers to Baltimore is greater on the weekend earlier."

Peggy Daidakis, director of the Baltimore Convention Center, said she welcomed the race. The convention center will be used as a paddock for the race cars, allowing visitors to view the high-powered vehicles in an air-conditioned spot.

University of Maryland officials said that they decided to close the campus after meeting with race organizers.

"We thought it would make sense for us to close and see just how bad traffic is," said Bob Rowan, the university's associate vice president of facilities and operations. He said that preliminary reports indicated students and employees could be caught in traffic for as long as two hours on their way to campus.

Friday and Saturday classes will be rescheduled and most campus facilities will remain closed over the weekend — unusual for the university, which normally closes only on national holidays.

Anwar Graves, president of the third-year law school class, said most of his classmates planned to put down their books over the long weekend. "I'm sure law students are

always happy to have a day off, although I'm sure we'll have to make it up down the line."

New students have been cautioned that moving into housing over Labor Day weekend could be complicated by the race, Rowan said.

The university's hospital will remain open, although staffers are asking patients to postpone elective surgery over the long weekend, Rowan said. Clinics run by the medical school and the dental school will be closed, although patients with health emergencies will be treated, he said.

A hospital spokeswoman said they were still finalizing plans to ensure ambulances have access to the hospital, as well as providing parking for staff and visitors.

Cole, the city councilman, and Davidson, the race organizer, stressed that the university had made the decision to close independently, and not at the recommendation of city or racing officials.

"It kind of baffles me," said Cole. "I would love to find somebody at Maryland and see what they're thinking."

Baltimore Racing Development officials have been meeting with building managers along the race route to alert them to street closings, Cole said. Only one office building lies in the area that will be cordoned off for the race: the Verizon building at the corner of Pratt and Light streets, he said.

"Every employee in that building will have a pass to get them inside that building," he said.

Cole said the benefits of the race would outweigh the inconveniences.

"At the end of the day, what you're looking at is filling a dark weekend in Baltimore," he said, adding that the race is expected to "pump millions of dollars" into the economy.

An economic impact report commissioned by race organizers indicates that the race could generate as much as \$70 million in financial benefits to the region, nearly twice as much as the Indy-style street races in St. Petersburg, Fla. and Long Beach, Calif.

Davidson said ticket sales "were off the hook" and that more than half of the grandstand seats had been sold for Saturday and Sunday. He declined to say how many tickets had been sold, adding, "We've been told by our promoter to stop talking about overall tickets."

Davidson said that the pace of signing sponsorship deals had "picked up" and that he expected to announce some new sponsors in the coming weeks. Organizers have not

signed a deal with a title sponsor, but he said the focus is on receiving a certain amount of sponsorship dollars, not landing one main sponsor.

City officials said they had fought to schedule the race over the holiday weekend in order to minimize the effect on those who live and work in the city.

"Believe it or not," O'Doherty said, "most people are pretty excited about the race."