

Gearing up for a Baltimore Grand Prix

Supporters see dollars, publicity; critics decry trees' fate, lack of input

by Sarah Breitenbach, *Gazette.net*, August 5, 2011

Race cars tearing through Baltimore's Inner Harbor, with thousands of spectators crowding around typically congested streets means a world of possibility to Baltimore City Councilman William H. Cole IV.

Cole, whose southwest district encompasses the entire two-mile course for the Baltimore Grand Prix, scheduled for Sept. 2 through 4, said the benefits of the city's first Indy car street race far outweigh any political risks associated with orchestrating such a major event two weeks before the primary election for mayor and City Council.

But some residents and community organizers say the race, which is expected to be an annual event for at least five years, is more of a hassle than it's worth and that they have been left in the dark when it comes to changes to public assets to accommodate the grand prix, such as tree removal along the course that caused controversy earlier this week.

As a backer for several years of the plan to bring street racing to the city, Cole, who is unopposed for re-election to the council, said mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and other elected officials don't have much to lose by endorsing an event he expects to bring \$60 million to \$70 million to the city this year.

Since the event was announced last summer, Cole has been selling the race to community groups and his neighbors. He is quick to point out that if the mayor and other elected officials were worried about the political effects of the race, the plan easily could have been pushed back by a year to avoid potential blowback during this fall's election.

"I think it also speaks to the mayor, her leadership style," Cole said. "I think she's very bold and very decisive and when she decided that this was something that is good for the city, politics never came into play."

Terry Hasseltine, director of sports marketing for the state's Department of Business and Economic Development, said rarely has he seen large events such as the grand prix, which is expected to garner between 6 million and 7 million international TV viewers in addition to more than 100,000 attendees, have a big effect in political circles.

In Washington, D.C., which held a less-than-successful race in 2002, dissatisfaction among residents stemmed from not being thoroughly informed about the race, Hasseltine said. In Baltimore, residents and spectators are ready for and expecting the crowds and congestion associated with it, he said.

"Obviously, if the event goes off and is that poobah event that everybody is anticipating, it can be those in the political circles (who) can jump up and say, 'Look at what we did,'" Hasseltine said. "But really, at the end of the day this is about the crux of the economic benefit to the (city and the state)."

But this week, opposition to the race went viral as residents learned trees were being removed along the race course to create better sightlines from the temporary grandstands now lining the harbor and surrounding streets.

Dave Troy, a software designer who lives in Bolton Hill and is frustrated by the removal of mature trees along Pratt Street and other thoroughfares, began a petition drive against the race.

Residents haven't been given proper notice of the tree removal, he said.

"My problem with that (is) in their attempt to explain to the public as to what would happen, they chose language that was designed to soften and mollify the public and to not elicit a public outcry," Troy said.

The petition has more than 1,000 signatures, and Troy plans to file an injunction to stop the removal of trees if they continue to be felled in what he believes is an illegal manner.

Troy also is frustrated by what he says was a lack of opportunity for feedback before Rawlings-Blake and other officials announced that the race would be coming to town.

"They (Grand Prix races) have not been universally successful," he said. "I almost wonder if we have this thing because no one else would take it and we're the suckers."

Jay Davidson, general manager for the grand prix, said that while he understands tree removal is a sensitive subject, some of the trees were not healthy. Others, he said, had to be removed for the economic viability of the race.

Race organizers are working with an arborist hired by the city to replace the trees, he said.

"People can get pretty emotional about trees," said Davidson, a Baltimore County resident who previously lived in Federal Hill. "In a downtown that doesn't have a tremendous number of them, I understand that."

Despite this week's outcry, Rawlings-Blake's political opponents have been mum on the race and hesitant to speculate about what a crash on the course or crime affecting race-goers could mean for the mayor's chances at the ballot box — the first time she faces election for her seat. (Rawlings-Blake, then council president, succeeded Sheila Dixon as mayor when Dixon resigned after her conviction in December 2009 for misappropriating gift cards.)

Joseph T. "Jody" Landers (D) a former city councilman and mayoral candidate who keeps his campaign office just off the race course on Key Highway, said the financial and political ramifications of the race are impossible to predict.

"Whatever misgivings I have, I don't want to be like I'm throwing water on something before it happens," he said. "We've come this far, and I'm just hopeful that it turns out well and we attract the crowds we are trying to attract."

Landers said he thinks the race will cost the city more than expected, which Cole says will be relatively little, aside from road improvements that already were in the works but accelerated once plans for the race were set.

Baltimore city police are treating the race as they would any other major event, police spokesman Anthony Gugliemi said.

All personnel have been told to report for duty that weekend, and Gugliemi said uniformed officers will be visible and plainclothes police will blend into the crowd.

Downtown crime was publicized recently when a stabbing and a shooting occurred during the Fourth of July celebration in the Inner Harbor.

While the grand prix is expected to draw a larger crowd than a typical Ravens' game at MT&T Bank Stadium, the race is similar to other major events like the Preakness and the Baltimore Running Festival, Gugliemi said.

"They (event attendees) frequent area restaurants, they go to bars, they come in and out safely," he said. "We do that all the time. We do the Preakness, which gets hundreds of thousands of people, and they get in and out safely."

Baltimore city spent \$7.75 million in state dollars for the road paving necessary to create a smooth course. That money can only be used for road projects and the work was already budgeted to be completed within the next three years, but was accelerated for the race.

Organizers are slated to cover other event-related costs, estimated at \$7 million to \$9 million, including public safety and emergency services.

In addition to paying for police and fire services, race officials also have incurred a \$250,000 franchising fee and directed \$100,000 to neighborhoods directly affected by the race, Davidson said.

They also will collect on the tickets, which range in price from \$25 for an adult one-day pass to \$895 for VIP three-day access.

"We're not giving anything away here," Cole said. "They're paying for services like fire and police and traffic enforcement. (Rawlings-Blake) negotiated a deal that puts the city in a very strong position every year that the race comes back."

Cole and other proponents speculate that the race not only could pump money into the hands of business owners and generate tax revenue, but will contribute to development downtown.

In Long Beach, Calif., where organizers have hosted a Grand Prix race through the streets for nearly 40 years, the event has had a hand in turning the city from a seedy Navy town to a tourist destination where new condo buildings tower over the course.

“These events can be very providential in terms of deliverables to a city,” said Jim Michhaelian, president and CEO of the Grand Prix Association of Long Beach. “That’s not to say that there are no downsides or issues that arise because they’re big events that take part in the (heart) of a city. Whether that enhances the redevelopment or showcases what has always (been there), all of those things are positive.”

If anything, Cole hopes the chance to spotlight the city for thousands of spectators and on TV will translate into other events and more convention bookings.

“Do we want to be a world- class destination and do we want to host the biggest sporting events?” Cole said. “Do we want to demonstrate that the next time there’s an opportunity for us to host the summer Olympics, we’re capable of doing it?”