

The long road to the Baltimore Grand Prix

By Julie Scharper and Justin Fenton, *The Baltimore Sun*, August 13, 2011

Steven Wehner had overcome dyslexia, a stint in jail on drug charges and the loss of his repair shop on Martha's Vineyard.

Living in the basement of his mother's Rodgers Forge home, he set his sights on his biggest challenge yet: Bringing an IndyCar race to downtown Baltimore.

With the drop of the green flag in three weeks, Wehner's dream will roar to life.

Glossy race cars are set to dart down newly paved roads alongside the Inner Harbor, bearing on their sleek frames the aspirations of city and state officials who are betting on the inaugural Baltimore Grand Prix to draw tens of thousands of race fans, pump tens of millions of dollars into the local economy and burnish the image of the city.

Organizers enlisted Indianapolis 500 champion Al Unser Jr. as a partner, won the support of Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and picked former Secretary of State Colin Powell to serve as grand marshal.

But behind the scenes, the event was hatched by an eclectic group that included a state delegate, an engineering tycoon and Wehner — an out-of-work mechanic who wasn't even a fan of car racing.

Dropping names and twisting arms, he talked his way into meetings with key city, state and IndyCar officials.

Despite racing's mixed record elsewhere, Baltimore leaders bought into the idea, and have spent more money on race preparations than any other U.S. city in recent memory, according to the head of IndyCar.

Supporters see an event that could transform Baltimore's ordinarily sleepy Labor Day weekend, now and in the future. Detractors see a boondoggle that already has cost millions of dollars and tied up traffic around the course for months, even before it paralyzes a large part of the city for several days.

Neither organizers nor government officials expect the race to turn a profit in the first year. But they say staging events such as the Baltimore Grand Prix is a necessary gamble if the city, which came up short in bids to host the Olympic Games in 2012 and the FIFA World Cup in 2022, is to become a bigger player in international sports.

"If you're ever going to change the city's image, if you're ever going to grow a tax base and change perceptions, you have to be willing to try new things," said City Councilman William H. Cole IV, an early supporter of the race, which will run through his district.

Wehner did not appear to have the background to pitch a three-day sporting event for a major city. But he had determination, and he had connections.

More important, officials say, he had a winning idea.

The Vineyard

The story of Baltimore's Grand Prix begins not in a downtown boardroom but on the moneyed island of Martha's Vineyard off the coast of Massachusetts.

Wehner, 51, made his home on the spit of land off Cape Cod for more than a decade, repairing Porsches and BMWs for its summer visitors.

The Baltimore native built bonds with islanders, including a race car-loving millionaire whose deep pockets proved vital in the early stages of creating the race.

Wehner, a stocky man with a white brush mustache, dresses as if he's ready for a day on the golf course or aboard a yacht. On a recent morning, he sported a white shirt emblazoned with the logo of his new company: IMD, short for International Marketing Development. Or, he said with a wink: "I make deals."

Wehner arrived at an interview this summer in a friend's sports car, telling reporters, "Follow the blue Porsche," before jumping into the passenger's seat and speeding down Roland Avenue. For a subsequent meeting, he pulled up in his own set of wheels: a Ford pickup pocked with rust.

By his own admission, Wehner is an inveterate name-dropper. He says frequently that he is descended from passengers aboard the Ark and the Dove — the ships that brought the first Europeans to Maryland.

But when Wehner arrived on the Vineyard, his life was far from luxurious.

It was 1994, five years after he had been released from the Baltimore County jail on drug conspiracy charges. He camped in a tent on the island for five weeks before finding an apartment.

Wehner fixed mopeds by day and worked as a sous chef at night. But soon he spotted a new market to tap: summer residents who were sending their foreign cars to the mainland for repairs.

Wehner, who had learned to work on cars in Baltimore, opened a business that he said grew into "the second-busiest shop on Martha's Vineyard for eight years."

He also developed contacts who would become some of the founding partners of Baltimore's Grand Prix.

His Vineyard friends rallied around Wehner when he tried to expand his repair shop into a gas station. A lawyer, a traffic engineer, and several financial backers helped him fight the island's government for permission to open the station.

The costly — and ultimately unsuccessful — legal battle eventually led to him to close the shop.

But the relationships that were strengthened during the failed court case would prove key to the birth of Baltimore's Grand Prix. When the defeated Wehner came home to Rodgers Forge and hatched his plan, he would call on his island friends for help.

A 'wild idea'

On a brisk morning in February 2008, Bill Cole sat in Mt. Vernon's City Cafe listening to Wehner pour out his grand idea in a torrent of words.

Wehner was so anxious he didn't touch his cream of crab soup.

"He was a nervous wreck," recalled Cole, who had joined the City Council two months before.

As the representative of the downtown area, Cole often meets with dreamers with lofty visions for the city. He wasn't a fan of auto racing; he wondered at first if Wehner were pitching a foot race.

It "seemed like the kind of wild idea you get all the time," Cole said. "I said, 'I don't know what to tell you, but I really don't see how this will work.'"

Cole had agreed to meet with Wehner at the request of a friend and fellow politician.

Keiffer J. Mitchell had lost the Democratic mayoral primary months earlier to Sheila Dixon. A friend had connected him with Wehner, who, like Mitchell, was a "B.L. guy" — a graduate of the private Boys' Latin School.

Mitchell soon became one of the Grand Prix's great champions, and, within a year, a partner in the company that Wehner founded to organize the race. Although Mitchell stepped away from the group after winning a seat last year in the House of Delegates, he retains a 1 percent share in the company.

The meetings with Mitchell and Cole were the culmination of more than two years of research and preparation by Wehner.

He says he became convinced that the Inner Harbor was the perfect setting for an Indy-style race, which he believed would reap big profits while presenting a new image of the city to the world.

All I heard about is 'Homicide' and '[The] Wire,'" he said. "You go to Green Spring Valley, Valley Road. That's Baltimore. You go down to the Chesapeake Bay, that's Baltimore. ... That's what the nation needs to know.

"My whole thing with the Grand Prix, I'm so sick of Baltimore getting dirtied, I say 'Take a look at this,' world."

As Wehner sketched out his plan, he sought advice — and money — from his contacts on Martha's Vineyard. He tapped an old friend, graphic designer Elizabeth Roman Davidson, a Roland Park Country School grad who had also lived on the Vineyard, to give his reports and letters a sleek, professional touch.

Davidson's husband, an attorney, would proofread documents for Wehner, who is dyslexic. Eventually, Jay Davidson would become the face of the Baltimore Grand Prix.

But in the spring of 2008, Wehner's most important backer was a retired General Electric executive descended from the 19th-century newspaper editor and politician Horace Greeley. Wehner had met Roger Greeley, an avid racing fan, through his repair shop.

From his hillside mansion on the Vineyard, Roger Greeley, an avid racing fan, sent Wehner five-figure checks nearly every month — seed money to start the company, Wehner says.

With interest from Mitchell and Cole, Wehner's dream was starting to take shape. He filed papers in April 2008 to formally incorporate Baltimore Racing Development as a company. Its address: his mother's home, where he continued to live in the basement.

Mayoral reservations

Two months later, Wehner scored a significant win — letters of support from Mayor Sheila Dixon, then-Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and Cole, with promises that the city was in talks with no other group about an Indy race.

Dixon says she maintained serious reservations about a street race alongside the Inner Harbor.

"I thought there were better things we needed to do with our money than have a car race down Pratt Street," she said.

She says she agreed to sign the letter of intent — which promised no financial commitment — at the urging of Cole and Rawlings-Blake.

"Bill Cole was really trying to push this, and then Stephanie was pushing it for him," Dixon recalled. "I was like, 'We'll look.'"

Cole said he was still not convinced the idea could work. But he figured there was no harm in giving Wehner the green light, as long as the city was not risking any money.

"At this point in time, he's asking for nothing other than the ability to prove the IZOD IndyCar series wants to come to Baltimore," Cole said. "All he wants to do is talk to the IndyCar series, and if [they're] interested, he wants to start negotiating."

But the letters of intent were enough to catch the attention of IndyCar officials.

On Labor Day weekend 2008, Wehner, the Davidsons and a Midwest attorney headed to Detroit to see a race and meet for the first time with racing executives

The weekend on Belle Isle, an island in the Detroit River that was home to the Detroit Belle Isle Grand Prix, was nearly derailed by a case of mistaken identity. But by chance, the delegation would stumble upon a driving legend and make a connection that would speed the Baltimore Grand Prix to the finish line.

A lucky meeting

Where was he?

Wehner looked around the Belle Isle conference room. After years of preparations, he found himself at last in the company of IndyCar's top officials. The team from Baltimore and Martha's Vineyard were there, but Thomas Kelty, the lawyer Wehner had asked to run the meeting, was missing.

Kelty was the father of an old friend. Wehner had asked him to get in touch with a man named John Lewis, an Indianapolis attorney who Wehner believed was IndyCar's director of marketing.

"He said he needed someone in the Midwest that could act as a go-between for me to make contacts and negotiate with the Indy Racing League," Kelty said.

"So I started searching around for John Lewis, but there wasn't any John Lewis with a law firm in Indy. So Steven Wehner had no idea what he was talking about."

Wehner would explain in a legal filing that "based on an Internet search" he had "concluded — erroneously — that John Lewis at the IRL was the same person who was a member of the Lewis & Wilkins law firm in Springfield."

Kelty excused himself from the meeting and did not return for 15 minutes.

In the conference room, a shaken Wehner began the pitch himself. The IndyCar team was impressed by what he had to say.

The IndyCar series had just merged with the rival Champ Car series, a deal intended to end years of acrimonious competition and help to expand open-wheel racing in North America. IndyCar officials were looking to establish a new market in the Mid-Atlantic, and Baltimore, with its scenic harbor, international airport and proximity to Washington and Philadelphia, might fill the bill.

Moreover, officials at the Richmond International Raceway in Virginia had been signaling that they were about to yank the IndyCar race there.

Richmond track officials had introduced open-wheel racing on the D-shaped loop in 2001 in the hope of developing interest among NASCAR fans. But an audience accustomed to watching boxy stock cars bump and jostle around the track found IndyCar racing dull.

A race through the streets of Baltimore — a better venue to show off Indy's sleek cars — could fill a key gap in the series.

Terry Angstadt, the president of IndyCar's commercial division, was impressed with Wehner's work: "I've not seen a group do better research and homework."

Wehner and Kelty would later sue each other, alleging deceit and lack of payment. The claims were eventually settled out of court.

Despite the confusion, Kelty's trip to Belle Isle did bring an unexpected gift to Wehner — and one that might have clinched the deal for Baltimore.

Kelty was leaving his hotel room when his son pointed out two-time Indianapolis 500 champion Al Unser Jr. passing by in a parking lot.

Kelty told Unser about the Baltimore plan. Unser, who had spent long stretches in the city while his daughter was being treated at the Kennedy Krieger Institute, joined the team within weeks.

The Detroit Belle Isle Grand Prix that the Baltimore delegation attended turned out to be the last. Organizers postponed the race in 2009 and again in 2010. It was losing money.

A mixed record

Most races lose money in their first one to three years, according to industry officials. IndyCar builds its schedule around a group of cities, notably Long Beach, Calif., and St. Petersburg, Fla., that have established successful annual events.

Other cities have flirted with street racing, only to see plans fall apart when the rubber met the road.

San Jose, Calif., gave a \$4 million subsidy to organizers of the San Jose Grand Prix in the hope that the downtown street race would be a fixture for years to come. It folded in 2007, after three years.

"There's certainly value to the national, international media exposure," said San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed. "It brings people to town. But at some point, you have to decide whether you can afford all of that good stuff."

The governments of Ontario and Toronto spent \$2 million in 2008 to keep the Grand Prix of Toronto there. The race was running deficits and the future of the event was in jeopardy.

In St. Petersburg, the city went from charging race organizers \$80,000 annually for firefighters, police and sanitation workers, to giving organizers a \$150,000 subsidy for those services.

"If you can break even or even come close in this day and age, or not just get annihilated without a title sponsor, you've done a hell of a job," said veteran racing columnist Robin Miller.

In November 2008, Cole met again with Wehner — this time, in a downtown conference room with top IndyCar officials and Unser.

"I'm not a race fan, but if you grew up without cable TV, the only thing you could watch on Memorial Day was the Indy 500, so I knew Al Unser Jr.," Cole said.

Now it was the IndyCar executives who were pitching Cole. Done well, they said, the event could draw up to 120,000 people in its first year, including affluent out-of-towners who would stay in city hotels, dine in city restaurants and shop at Inner Harbor stores.

Cole contacted then-Deputy Mayor Andrew B. Frank. "It's real," Cole said.

Official support grows

By 2009, plans for the race were shifting into high gear. Terry Hasseltine, newly appointed as the state's first director of sports marketing, was now pushing for the race. His office would help organizers secure key loans from the state.

"I think the potential is bigger than what people are making it out to be," he said. "You had a council president [Rawlings-Blake] who was like, 'Yeah, I like this.' The [Dixon administration] didn't grasp a long-term view of what this could do economically in branding equity for the city of Baltimore."

The race was far from the sole source of tension in City Hall at the time. Dixon was about to go to trial on charges of perjury and embezzlement, and Rawlings-Blake, once a key ally and close friend, was distancing herself.

In July, the City Council passed a resolution, sponsored by Cole, supporting the race. In August, Rawlings-Blake helped organizers present the idea to the public.

Mitchell suggested organizers begin selling Baltimoreans on the event. The months of work needed to create a downtown race course would be a major disturbance, and community support would be crucial.

The inaugural running of the National Grand Prix of Washington in 2002 was supposed to be the first in an annual series. But District residents complained that the race had been foisted on them, and the event never returned.

Mitchell says race added another element. The fan base for motorsports is largely white. The city's population is largely black.

"You've got a sport that's not ... the majority of its followers are not the majority of the population here," Mitchell says. "You've got to reach out to the community to show them how this can benefit."

Stepping back

As the plan gained momentum, backers began to ask questions about its leadership. Government officials were enthusiastic about the event, but they were not convinced that Wehner was the right person to lead it.

By now, Davidson, the husband of Wehner's longtime friend, was moving into a key role in negotiations.

A tall man with wavy blond hair and a chiseled jaw, Davidson was the son of a diplomat and a graduate of Gilman, Princeton and Georgetown's law school. He had taken a buyout from his position as a corporate attorney and was not employed as the race started to come together.

Davidson brought in Walker Mygatt, a high-ranking executive at Constellation Energy. Davidson and Mygatt were polished businessmen; Wehner, by his own admission, was rougher around the edges.

"One of my jobs early on, which was very exhausting, was to explain diplomacy and political etiquette" to Wehner," Mitchell said. "I talked to him and said that from my perspective as a city person, if I was in government, I can't see the city doing anything with you as the head."

Cole said the event had progressed beyond a great idea.

"We sat down and started talking about how many significant obstacles they'd have to overcome — chief among them, they have to raise a lot of money, with a full

understanding that they would have to demonstrate a completely different company before anybody would invest anything in them," Cole said.

"I will always credit the guy with having the guts to bring the idea forward. But he was not the guy to put the corporation together and to manage and run it."

Wehner doesn't dispute the assessment.

"I knew Jay was the right person to get this permitted," he said.

Wehner's signature appears on various documents and contracts signed through 2009. But by February 2010, both sides agree, he had stepped aside.

Davidson says the other investors bought out Wehner's shares. Under terms of a separation agreement, both sides say, Wehner still stands to make money from the event.

'I relapsed'

Since the late 1970s, Wehner says, he has struggled with an addiction to cocaine and crack. Soon after he left Baltimore Racing Development, he found himself back in jail for a night.

For months, according to a police report, neighbors in Rodgers Forge had complained that a man was selling drugs from one of the tidy brick rowhouses.

On July 30, 2010, Baltimore County officers burst into Wehner's mother's home.

According to the report, they found two Coca-Cola cans with burnt cocaine residue, burnt metal spoons, glass vials contained white powder residue and a large amount of ziplock baggies containing white powder and residue — all indications of crack cocaine.

Wehner was charged with drug possession. He spent a night in jail, he says, before he was released on his own recognizance.

Wehner had spent eight months in a Baltimore County jail in 1989 awaiting trial on misdemeanor drug distribution conspiracy charges after, he says, he was caught on a wiretap arranging a drug deal. It was on a work-release program, he says, that he learned to work on cars.

In court, he pleaded guilty to one count and was released.

Now, in January 2011, the man who had sold Unser, IndyCar and city officials on the Baltimore Grand Prix once again stood before a judge.

"I'm sure you've heard this story a million times," Wehner told District Judge Sally C. Chester, according to court records. "I relapsed, thought it was under control. I thought at this stage of the game I could handle it — there's no handling this."

Wehner's attorney told Chester of his role founding the Baltimore Grand Prix.

"Wow," Chester said, according to court records. She sentenced Wehner to probation before judgment and a \$250 fine.

Wehner told The Baltimore Sun that "under no circumstances" was he under the influence of drugs while working on the Grand Prix project. He said he quit "cold turkey" after the arrest last summer.

Progress, and doubt

As Wehner stepped aside, plans for the Grand Prix hurtled forward.

Rawlings-Blake was sworn in as mayor in February 2010. Three months later, she signed a contract with Baltimore Racing Development pledging a five-year commitment — and \$7.75 million in roadwork — to the race.

Kaliope Parthemos, deputy mayor for economic development, has spearheaded the project for the city, devoting about half her time in recent weeks to race preparations.

Parthemos said city employees teamed up with race organizers to produce an economic impact report that indicated the race would have an economic impact of \$70 million — nearly twice that of the long-established events in St. Petersburg and Long Beach.

City officials did not complete an independent report on the viability of a street race in Baltimore, but Parthemos said they did their "due diligence."

"There wasn't an actual comparison report, but [we were] calling St. Pete's and having conversations with their teams and calling Long Beach and having conversations with their teams," she said.

Rawlings-Blake and Parthemos traveled to the Indianapolis 500 last year — at the city's expense — to meet with IndyCar executives and get an up-close view of how that city puts on a race.

Still, challenges remained. Race backers never produced a title sponsor for the event. And they asked the Maryland Stadium Authority for more time to make bond payments on a \$2 million project to create a pit lane in the parking lot at Camden Yards.

On the date last December that race organizers were due to make their final \$500,000 bond payment to the Maryland Stadium Authority, they received a \$500,000 loan from the Maryland Economic Development Corp.

"I'll be very honest — there was a period of time when it was unclear the race was going to happen," said Parthemos.

Davidson says that race organizers have sold about 75 percent of grandstand tickets and have sold more than 80 hospitality suites. He declined to provide the total number of tickets sold.

The city has paid for more than \$6 million in roadwork along the two-mile race course. Officials say much of the work was slated to happen in coming years even without the race.

The city is charging race organizers a \$250,000 annual fee and, for the first year, \$500,000 to pay for police, firefighters and other services during the event. The amount will increase in subsequent years.

City officials say the race should reap about \$2 million a year in direct tax benefits for the city.

Rawlings-Blake said the benefits of the race are worth the investment.

"I'm not ashamed of working hard to be a bold leader for our city," she said. "No one has come up with a better idea for bringing that many people to the city."

The contract includes a profit-sharing clause, though Cole is skeptical that the city will reap any windfall.

"I can tell you this much: I don't think anybody's making money. As best as I can tell, this is not a cash cow," he said.

Davidson said organizers expect to lose money in the first year, but investors will keep the race going. Barring a catastrophe, he said, he sees no scenario in which the race won't return for a second year.

'I give him a lot of credit'

As the event has approached, Davidson has publicly distanced Baltimore Racing Development from Wehner. He stresses that Wehner left the group before it signed contracts with the city.

Still, he praised Wehner as "a super-creative person."

"It's just not the way my brain works — 'Let's bring a street race to Baltimore,'" he said. 'I give him a lot of credit for being that guy.'

The current team includes a concert promoter, a restaurant owner, a former treasurer of the Maryland Democratic Party and a former city parking authority official — in addition to a few of Wehner's original group from Martha's Vineyard.

For a year, they've been holed up in an office at [Oriole Park at Camden Yards](#), working with veteran race planners to pull together the logistics.

Davidson says the race will cost Baltimore Racing Development a little less than \$10 million to stage this year.

Thirty-foot-tall grandstands now glint in the summer sun around the Inner Harbor. Workers have begun setting up concrete walls and fencing along the course, labor that will continue over the next three weeks.

Racing officials have mailed a flier to area residents detailing road closures, MTA schedule adjustments and other important details.

Race organizers touched off an outcry recently when they cut down some trees along the race route to make way for grand stands. They have said they will plant many more trees than the 70 they removed from city and state property.

Wehner talks with race organizers from time to time, he says, but he is focused on his own projects through a new company.

He has not yet filed the paperwork to incorporate in Maryland. A mere formality, he says.

"Everyone's like, 'You ought to have the company be real [before entering into agreements],'" Wehner says. "I'm like, 'No, I'm real.' "

IndyCar officials confirm that they have an agreement with Wehner and his new company to negotiate street races in three other cities. First up: Seattle.

"He's an interesting guy," said Angstadt, who is now IndyCar's president. "I think sometimes you can get a little caught off guard; he's a little unique."

Roger Greeley, Wehner's early investor, died in late 2009, after a summer of hosting meetings about the race in his Vineyard home. His obituary indicated the Baltimore Grand Prix would be dedicated to his memory.

But with new organizers, new supporters and — backers hope — new fans, the race already has grown beyond its origins.

Wehner, who visited the course last week, said it was "freaky, standing there and seeing it all."

"In 2005, that's how I imagined it all would look," he said.