

Track developers promise first-class facility

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MAHONING TWP. -- Even though Centaur Gaming is no longer involved with the effort to bring a harness-racing track and casino to Lawrence County, the track's new developers have retained one key element of prior plans for the facility.

American Harness Tracks, the Pittsburgh-based company that officially bought Centaur's Lawrence County assets last week, plans to build a 1-mile harness-racing track, which would be the only one of that length in Pennsylvania. The track-casino complex is to be called Valley View Downs.

While that element was included in the plans unveiled by Centaur in February 2008, the one-mile concept dates to 2004, when Mahoning Township businessman Carmen Shick proposed building the Valley View Downs track.

Shick was rejected for a harness-racing license and sold the property to Centaur, which received the license in 2007. Centaur failed to obtain funding for the project, and American Harness Tracks won the rights to apply for the harness-racing license as part of Centaur's bankruptcy action.

American Harness Tracks announced Tuesday that it has closed on the purchase of Centaur's Valley View Downs-related assets. Matt Sodl, managing director for Innovation Capital in Los Angeles, said American Harness Tracks is aiming to develop a first-class facility, and the 1-mile track is a part of that effort.

Sodl, whose company is American Harness Tracks' financial adviser, said there was little likelihood that the company would scale back the track length because the state Harness Racing Commission has been supportive of developing a 1-mile track, dating to Shick's involvement in the process.

"I think the group has big plans for the site," Sodl said of American Harness Tracks.

Those big plans could include a bid for one of U.S. harness racing's six top-tier races. Standardbred, better known as harness, racing has two sets of Triple Crown series, depending upon the horse's stride.

Pacing's Triple Crown is the Cane Pace, Little Brown Jug and the Messenger Stakes. Trotting's Triple Crown is the Hambletonian Stakes, Yonkers Trot and Kentucky Futurity.

The Messenger Stakes and Yonkers Trot are both run at Yonkers Raceway in Yonkers, N.Y., which is owned by the family of Pittsburgh Steelers founder Art Rooney.

The Hambletonian Stakes is run at Meadowlands Racetrack in East Rutherford, N.J., but the race organizers' contract with the venue expires next year, and the Meadowlands, which is not associated with a casino, was reported earlier this year by the New York Times to be experiencing financial difficulties.

Sodl did not comment on the prospect that a possible Lawrence County track could poach the

Hambletonian or any other Triple Crown race, but promised that Valley View Downs would be "a first-class facility."

American Harness Tracks is facing a Sept. 12 deadline imposed by the state Harness Racing Commission to indicate that it has obtained \$150 million in financing for the facility before any harness-racing license will be released. Under the state laws that govern casino gambling, any entity that holds a harness-racing license will be able to apply for a casino license, which is deemed to be a more lucrative prize.

As an official for the financial adviser for American Harness Tracks, Sodl said the company is diligently trying to meet that deadline.

"We're working," Sodl said. "We're in the process of working with investors. We're hopeful."