

Council must do U-turn on dumping Race City

BY PAULA ARAB, CALGARY HERALD SEPTEMBER 17, 2009

If it involves tires and rolls in front of council, you can bet the outcome will be a wheely bad job. No joke. (Think traffic congestion, poorly synchronized lights, badly plowed roads, LRT parking, etc.) Anything to do with a motor and wheels seems to leave Calgary aldermen in a rut.

The latest bad decision being steered through chambers revolves around the future of Race City Motorsport Park. Council wants to kill the popular speedway's lease to expand its neighbouring dump.

Seriously. If aldermen can vote to rip down the heritage Cecil Hotel for a parking lot, the same members of council can be expected to put garbage above the storied racing track. Never mind Race City generates \$10 million in economic activity through its events and the business that support its activities--drag, stock car and motorcycle racing, concerts, and the best karting facility in Western Canada, bar none. Forget the money, though, it's the magic of the place that's important.

The official reason cited for the city refusing to renew Race City's lease after 2010 is, with capacity running out at the neighbouring Shepard Landfill, it wants the land for storm water retention.

But with 388.5 hectares of licensed landfill area and 64.7 hectares of future landfill, according to city assessments of Shepard, there's no reasonable reason to play hardball with Race City by insisting its 64.7-hectare site is the only space appropriate for a new retention pool.

There's plenty of capacity in the landfill for another 30 years, according to city documents.

Aldermen have so far sided with administration, voting against extending the lease until 2015. A motion to reconsider will be brought back to council at the end of the month.

"It's a lack of appreciation for the value the facility has for the city of Calgary," says Ald. Ric McIver, who represents Race City's ward and has strategically delayed his motion so supporters Aldermen Diane Colley-Urquhart and Jim Stevenson can be there to vote. He believes with everyone in the room, he has enough support to win.

That would mean Race City would live another five years in Calgary. It's better than shutting the doors next year, and it helps give the 200 local businesses and clubs affiliated with the track a chance to find a new home. But we still lose a great recreational space in a city that needs more--not fewer-- such facilities.

Council needs to undo the harm it's already done and make a commitment big enough and good enough to keep motorsports alive and growing in our city.

"The loss to Calgary is the disappearance of a major national and international sporting venue," says Art MacKenzie, the president of Race City Motor Sports Inc., which signed a lease until 2025, with the option of renewing every five years. It's now fighting the city legally, alleging the city failed to hold up to its end of the contract.

The easy solution is to build the storm water retention on the other side of Race City, at an estimated cost of \$3 million. That's a bargain when you factor in the tangible and intangible benefits of the speedway.

How much is the city going to spend to mount its legal defence? What about the people whose livelihoods are built around the activities of Race City, the businesses that pay taxes to Calgary and the \$10 million a year MacKenzie says is generated in economic activity? The company employs six full time staff, 25 seasonal full timers, 95 part-timers and has more than 250 volunteers. It sublets to the Calgary Kart Racing Club which alone generates \$2 million a year.

The 25-year-old operation includes an oval, a drag racing course and a roadway course. The popular Secret Street street racing program every Friday night draws about 1,000 spectators and drivers, who bring their attitude and souped-up cars, and release their pent-up speed demons in a safe environment. Police are particularly concerned about the loss of this program, fearing public safety will be at risk with a rise of illegal street racing.

Even the worst driver can go down and get the chance to drive a Formula One race car, taught by a former Formula One racer, Allen Berg. Where else does that happen? Berg, one of a handful of Canadians to ever make it to Formula One racing, is Calgary's best kept secret. He has operated a school out of Race City for the past three years, but not for much longer if the anti-vehicle contingent on council has a say.

"There's about 10 tracks that would like to have us, in Canada, the U. S. and Europe," says Berg, who answers his company phone. "The closer we could be based to where we are now, the better."

He says he'll likely relocate to Vancouver, or (gasp) Edmonton.

I'm no racing fan, but even I can see council needs to do a U-turn, and fast.

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