

Racing brain trust: Familiar faces on Roy McDonald's new panel

Published: Friday, April 08, 2011

By PATRICK H. DONGES, The Saratogian

SARATOGA SPRINGS — With the state budget finalized on deadline for the first time in decades, Sen. Roy McDonald, R-Saratoga, is seizing the moment to strengthen the horse racing industry both locally and statewide with the formation of a new advisory committee.

"We have a great window of opportunity to not be on defense anymore," McDonald said Friday at the first meeting of the new committee, held at the offices of the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce.

Former Saratoga chamber president Joe Dalton will co-chair the 15-member committee with local breeder Joe McMahan.

Local government officials, including Saratoga Springs Mayor Scott Johnson and recently retired Saratoga County Administrator David Wickerham, and local business leaders, including Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce president Todd Shimkus and Adirondack Trust Co. president and CEO and New York Racing Association board member Charles Wait will also sit on the board.

Several board members thanked McDonald Friday for the formation of the new group which they hope will focus on goals like long term planning for the future of racing, the drafting of racing legislation and a review of local racing and gaming issues.

"We need to make sure that Saratoga racing gets stronger," said Ellen Bongard, horse breeder and owner of Rojan Farm in Schuylerville, adding that as the number of tracks decline across the country the number of horses will follow.

"We need breeders to raise better horses," she said.

Dalton said the group should schedule a meeting with New York Racing Association officials, presumably president and CEO Charles Hayward, in the next few weeks, a sentiment echoed by several other committee members.

"That should be as quickly as possible," Dalton said, suggesting two briefings be scheduled with NYRA.

"We have not paid attention to national trends," said McMahan, citing a prevailing attitude among some officials that Saratoga is insulated because of its high standing in the industry. "I don't think that we can afford to do that anymore."

McMahan went on to mention the recent rejection of a proposed Native American casino in the Catskills by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, calling the decision an "ace in the hole."

"I don't think we can afford to be outside that looking in," he said, responding to comments made by McDonald that there are still proponents of full casino gambling within the legislature.

"Thank God those in (Washington) agreed with what we advocated," said Johnson, referring to the decision not to allow the Catskill casino.

Calling formation of the committee "long overdue," Johnson said he would like to meet with the top officials from the state's five Off Track Betting companies.

"We've all heard the argument that six full branches is very inefficient," he said, referring to New York City Off Track Betting Corp., which closed its doors due to bankruptcy late last year. "I'd like to hear the other side from them."

"I've never felt better about the future of thoroughbred racing in New York than I do right now," said Michael Veitch, advocate and Saratogian horse racing columnist, adding that negative national gaming trends may actually be helping Saratoga.

Veitch, whose son Michael Veitch Jr. will serve as legislative liaison to the board in his position as McDonald's communication director, suggested extending an invitation to New York Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association president Rick Violette to join the panel.

"I think he should be here," he said of Violette, adding that the tracks at Aqueduct and Belmont should also be a focus of the group.

McDonald, agreeing that a briefing by NYRA officials was in order, said his office would be in contact with NYRA to arrange their presence at future meetings.

Staff from the Senate Racing, Gaming and Wagering Committee will also be on hand for the committee's next meeting; McDonald said he hopes to hold three meetings before the end of the legislative session and the beginning of the Saratoga racing season.

The panel also requested that members of the public submit written comments and suggestions for review. Suggestions can be sent to McDonald's Albany office at 188 State Street Room 918, Legislative Office Building Albany, NY 12247.

Senator Roy McDonald's 43rd District Racing Advisory Panel:

- Joe Dalton (Co-Chair) — Former Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce President
- Joe McMahon (Co-Chair) — Horse Breeder, McMahon Thoroughbreds
- Scott Johnson — Mayor, City of Saratoga Springs
- Ellen Bongard — Horse Breeder, Rojan Farm
- Skip Carlson — Saratoga Casino & Raceway
- Rita Cox — Saratoga Casino & Raceway
- Peter Goold — Executive Director, NYS Horse Breeding & Development Fund

- Neil Kelleher, Jr. — Capital District OTB Board of Directors
- Ed Lewi — Concerned Citizens for Saratoga Racing
- Tom Roohan — Concerned Citizens for Saratoga Racing
- Todd Shimkus — Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce President
- Rod Sutton — Concerned Citizens for Saratoga Racing
- Michael E. Veitch — Horse racing journalist
- Charles Wait — NYRA Board of Directors, President and CEO Adirondack Trust Co.
- Dave Wickerham — Former Saratoga County Administrator

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