

## BUSINESS TODAY

# Takeover on Track

## Suffolk Downs grabs option to buy Wonderland

By SCOTT VAN VOORHIS

Suffolk Downs' lead investor Richard Fields has taken another step in his quest to transform his East Boston racetrack into a gambling resort.

Fields wrapped up a deal, two years in the making, that gives his Hub horse racing venue an option to acquire nearby Wonderland Greyhound Park in Revere sometime in the future.

In the meantime, Suffolk and Wonderland have agreed to present a joint bid if Gov. Deval Patrick revives his resort-casino proposal next year.

Wonderland gets an ally — as it faces foreclosure by the city of Revere over hundreds of thousands in unpaid real estate taxes and a ballot measure that would outlaw greyhound racing. Suffolk takes care of its toughest competitor for a resort casino close to Boston.

The partnership has already won praise from Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who believes it strengthens plans to turn Suffolk Downs into a resort casino, said Dot Joyce, the mayor's spokeswoman.

Others had a similar assessment.

"He is betting the governor will push for casino gambling again and it's a very good bet on his part," said the Rev. Richard McGowan, an economics professor and gaming industry expert at Boston College. "It doesn't cost (Fields) all that much and it gives him incredible leverage."

The agreement eliminates a potentially damaging rivalry between the two racetracks to

### Wonderland Greyhound Park

190 VFW Parkway, Revere

**Owner:** Charles Sarkis

■ Sarkis' private Westwood Group controls Wonderland. He also heads the Back Bay Restaurant Group, operator of Abe & Louie's, Joe's American Bar & Grill and Papa Razzi.

**First race:** June 12, 1935

■ An estimated 5,000 patrons saw fleet-footed Pansy Walker win on an evening when \$58,462 was wagered.

**Trackside seating:** 3,500

■ One superstar was Rural Rube, who dominated the 1939 racing season with 19 wins and devoured a steak during an honorary dinner with 1,500 fans at Boston's Copley Plaza.

**Track length:** 1,320 feet

■ Wonderland hosts two of the industry's top events, the Grady Memorial Sprint and Wonderland Derby.



### Dog and pony shows



### Suffolk Downs

111 Waldemar Ave., East Boston

**Principal shareholders:** Richard Fields, Joseph O'Donnell

■ An ownership group including local concessionaire O'Donnell bought Suffolk Downs in 1997. Fields, a casino developer from New York, acquired his stake in 2007.

**First race:** July 10, 1935

■ An estimated 35,000 turned out to watch Carl Hanford, riding Eddie Wrack, beat the inaugural field. Five days later, Seabiscuit makes his Suffolk Downs debut (finishing fourth).

**Grandstand seating:** 6,000

■ Before a crowd of 25,000, the Beatles played a concert on the track on Aug. 18, 1966 - 11 days before the Fab Four's final live show.

**Track length:** 1 mile

■ Suffolk Downs' signature event is the \$500,000 Massachusetts Handicap, set for Sept. 20.



Sources: Suffolk Downs, Wonderland Greyhound Park

STAFF GRAPHIC BY JEFF WALSH

become the site of a resort casino.

After Patrick unveiled a proposal last year for three resort casinos, including one in the Boston area, Fields and Suffolk found themselves faced with competition from Wonderland's owner, Boston restaurateur Charles Sarkis.

Even as Fields and his fellow Suffolk owners, including concessions magnate Joseph

O'Donnell, lined up support from Menino for the idea of a resort casino on the Eastie site, Sarkis was shopping his Revere track to potential casino partners.

Still, it's not clear when Fields and his fellow Suffolk partners will exercise their option to buy Wonderland. No timetable was laid out in yesterday's announcement.

But having the two track

owners pitching the same plan, rather than competing proposals, should help boost the chances of a gambling bill passing on Beacon Hill, said state Rep. Brian Wallace (D-South Boston).

The deal also expands Suffolk's development options, potentially adding Wonderland's 35 acres near Revere Beach to Suffolk's 167-acre site just two miles away. One pos-

sible option would be a hotel and some gambling at Wonderland and a casino at Suffolk, which will continue to have horse racing.

"It clears up the picture a little bit more," Wallace said. "There was always that competition and both of them have some supporters. We (just) picked up a bunch of votes."

— sbvanvoorhis@bostonherald.com