

Suffolk seems to be on the right track

By Mark Blaudschun

GLOBE STAFF

The good news at Suffolk Downs is that as the East Boston track hits the final stretch of the season — it ends with a two-day card on Breeders' Cup weekend, Nov. 4-5 — there are more signs that it is moving out of survival mode.

Case in point is Saturday's Food Truck Festival, which will be highlighted by the \$100,000 Robert O'Malley Sprint Stakes, a 6-furlong challenge for fillies and mares, 3 years old and up. It is the highest purse for a race at Suffolk since the 2008 Massachusetts Handicap.

Also on the card is the John Kirby Stakes, a \$50,000 race over a mile and 70 yards for Massachusetts-bred 3-year-olds and up.

More encouraging to Suffolk management is that there appears to be movement on its long-standing wish to turn the complex into a slot/casino/racing outlet that would not only enhance thoroughbred racing's future in New England, but also bring in shops, hotels, and restaurants.

It remains a pie-in-the-sky type wish until the legislation legalizes gaming. The popular theory is that — barring further setbacks or delays — during the next three years, casinos will be constructed in Western Massachusetts (between Springfield and Worcester?), Southeastern Massachusetts (New Bedford area), and the Boston area (Suffolk Downs?), as well as one slot machine operation (Plainridge?)

Suffolk COO Chip Tuttle chose to give the overall future of racing in New England a positive spin, while conceding there are still problems throughout the industry — fewer tracks, smaller purses, smaller fields, and the disturbing news that not only are handles down, but that the annual foal crop is down 30 percent over the past five years.

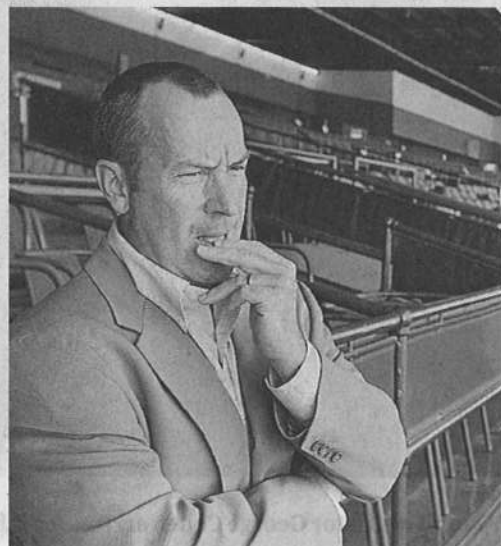
"There's definitely a sense of optimism," said Tuttle. "But there are still a couple of steps in the process which need to be done."

Tuttle made it clear that Suffolk's desire is to get a gaming license as a full casino.

"Our preferences have been to get one of the commercial licenses, with racing as the centerpiece," Tuttle said.

The cost of such an operation will not be cheap. Suffolk has already entered a strategic alliance with Caesars Entertainment to develop a world-class facility. The cost of a casino license is \$85 million and then the developer must pledge to invest a minimum of \$500 million.

The three proposed areas for casinos are technically defined by geographical parameters, with Worcester falling in the Boston area (Suffolk's territory). But logic would seem to dictate that a cas-



PAT GREENHOUSE/2010 FILE/GLOBE STAFF

Suffolk COO Chip Tuttle knows the racing industry faces major challenges, but said, "There's definitely a sense of optimism."

no between Springfield and Worcester is a reasonable compromise.

"We would hope that the strength of having 76 years as a responsible participant in the gambling business would be a factor in our favor," said Tuttle.

Overall, Tuttle said, the move last winter to condense the racing schedule (80 days as opposed to 100) and offer bigger purses has worked.

"It's been a pretty good year," he said.

Tuttle conceded that even with modest improvements, racing is still fighting for survival, not only in New England, but nationally.

"We've held steady this year," he said. "But with the growth of casino-type gambling, and the migration of on-track wagering to off-track wagering and even at home with the growth of online wagering accounts, it has been a challenge. Our industry has to come to grips with the changing technology."

Keeping alive thoroughbred racing in New England — and preserving the tradition of Suffolk Downs — is a major undertaking, said Tuttle, especially when coupled with the desire to bring a casino/racing complex to East Boston.

"We anticipate a vigorous competition for the game licenses," he said. "But the horsemen feel good and we feel good about the direction we are headed."

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