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Raceway brings new hope to old glassmaking town

by South Jersey News Online

Friday September 21, 2007, 1:55 PM

MILLVILLE (AP) -- After more than a decade on the drawing board, construction is under way on a car racing complex that aims to rev up this downtrodden city's economic engine.

The \$150 million Thunderbolt Raceway, a portion of which is set to open next summer, will feature four kinds of race tracks, a conference center, hotel, an automotive research and development center and 180 condominiums. With limited stadium seating, it will focus on bringing smaller races, exhibitions and corporate events to Millville, a city of 28,000 in New Jersey's poorest county.

"You're going to get a lot of job creation from this, restaurants, hotels," said James F. Quinn, mayor of the city about 30 miles west of Atlantic City, which until the last few decades was supported largely by huge glass factories.

Donald Fauerbach, a Millville native, motorcycle and car racer and the executive director of the New Jersey Conference of Mayors, has been promoting the idea of a big motorsports complex for New Jersey for 15 years.

Until four years ago, those efforts stalled. But at a 2003 conference in New York, a Millville official made a pitch for developers to consider the Cumberland County town for new shopping centers. He also mentioned a dream: a racing facility for a city that's been suffering economically since once-dominant glass factories moved out or cut back years ago.

One of those developers, Lee Brahin, who drives race cars, was more excited by the idea for a track than a shopping center, even though he had

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never developed a race track before.

"We weren't really in the market," he said. "It was something that just happened by chance."

He brought on Harvey Siegel, a developer who took over the venerable Virginia International Raceway in Danville, Va., and turned it into a country club for auto lovers. They decided to try the same concept in Millville.

After years of meeting regulators' demands and soothing the worries of environmentalist opponents, construction began earlier this year.

The first parts are scheduled to open in the summer of 2008. Plans call for two winding road courses known as "Thunder" and, naturally, "Lightning," a track for souped-up go-carts that can go up to 160 mph, a dirt ATV course and a paved oval for stock car racing.

While organizers would love to land a top-level Nextel Cup NASCAR race one day -- the stadium would have to be bigger than the 25,000 capacity one planned now -- the main attraction is smaller races and hobbyists.

Car clubs are already booking the track.

Riesentoter, the Philadelphia area branch of the Porsche Club of America, has requested a date on the track for next year.

Club president Brian Minkin is disappointed that instead of having one longer course, the complex will have two shorter courses of about 2 miles each. And he says a daily rental is costing the club about \$17,000 a day -- more than other tracks they use.

But Minkin, who has a 1977 Porsche 911 set up for racing, said that it's still an exciting development for car enthusiasts.

It's closer to Philadelphia than the Pocono Raceway, and he noted, "It appears it's going to be a superior road course to Pocono."

Track organizers say well-heeled sports car enthusiasts could fly into the Millville Municipal Airport next to the facility, stay at a condo for the weekend and take spins in their sports cars, which could be garaged at the raceway.

For those without private jets, the track is within a three hour-drive of New York, Philadelphia and Washington for those who follow the speed limits.

Patrons can buy memberships, just like at country clubs: \$5,000 to join and \$2,400 a year.

The builders are also hoping the tracks will be used for testing by car makers and the cart track becomes the centerpiece of corporate team-building retreats.

Millville has suffered as southern New Jersey's glassmaking industry

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evolved over the last 30 years, from a huge employer that makes bottles for Budweiser to a smaller one that largely serves the specialized glass needs of the pharmaceutical industry.

The city has had some success attracting new manufacturers. And it has used loans and grants to lure artists into town. The result is a downtown that's gone from half-vacant to surprisingly active.

Mayor Quinn said drivers, race fans and their families can help the stabilized downtown becoming a booming one.

"We need to get more feet on the street," he said.

A Rowan University study that found the track could have about 1,500 jobs on-site and create about 4,500 elsewhere in the region and eventually add more than \$200 million a year to the region's economy.

Quinn said he understood the potential of the racing complex after he visited Virginia International Raceway.

"Any time there is an event at VIR, our hotels are at or near capacity and so are our restaurants," said Jeff Reed, Danville's assistant director of economic development.

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