

SARATOGA SPRINGS PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

HISTORIC SARATOGA RACE COURSE

BALANCING MODERNIZATION AND
PRESERVATION AT THE JEWEL OF AMERICAN
THOROUGHBRED RACING

POSITION PAPER

ADVOCATING A FOUR-PRONGED APPROACH TO PROTECTING AND PRESERVING SARATOGA RACE COURSE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Saratoga Race Course is the jewel of American Thoroughbred Racing, and is an important economic and cultural/historic resource in Saratoga Springs. Its historic and architectural significance is reflected in its inclusion in the Union Avenue National Register District. Only the southern sections of the Race Course are included in the Saratoga Springs' Union Avenue Historic District. The Preservation Foundation and its coalition partners are extremely concerned about the future integrity of the architecture of Saratoga Race Course. None of the reports or conversations on the future of racing fully addresses this concern. In this position paper, we propose the mechanisms for ensuring the long-term preservation of Saratoga Race Course.

Preservation of the historic character of the Saratoga Race Course is a value shared by Saratoga Springs residents, business leaders, members of the racing community and race fans from across the country. It is clear that modernization and upgrades to the facilities are necessary to ensure that it retains its competitiveness. With the prospect of an imminent change in management, it is critical to establish the process to accomplish both modernization and preservation of the historic Race Course. The Saratoga Springs Preservation Foundation, and a coalition of business and industry groups, advocates the adoption of the following 4-pronged approach:

- 1) Inventory: Complete an updated historic resources survey identifying all buildings and landscape features and their current condition.**
- 2) Protect: Incorporate all buildings and landscaped features of historic, architectural or cultural significance into the Union Avenue local historic district.**
- 3) Plan: Ensure that a comprehensive facilities management plan including design standards, based on the Secretary of the Interior Standards, is completed.**
- 4) Oversee: Place the Race Course under the architectural oversight of the Saratoga Springs Design Review Commission. The DRC must have the authority to review all proposed additions, renovations, or demolitions at the Saratoga Race Course.**

The oversight process must be explicitly spelled out in the contract. After completing the inventory and plan, the Track Management must be obligated to seek review and approval from local authorities for any alternations, additions or demolitions.

BACKGROUND

Each summer, the Thoroughbred horseracing community returns to Saratoga Springs. Attendance at Saratoga Race Course approaches one million people. The economic impact of the Race Course on the surrounding region is significant: a study commissioned by the Saratoga County Industrial Development Agency reported that in 2006 the racing industry had between a \$186 million to \$214 million economic impact and created 2,800 jobs in the region.

"Agriculture and tourism are the two most important industries in Saratoga County. The Saratoga Race Course is an indispensable asset to both of them." Thomas Wood, spokesperson for Concerned Citizens for Saratoga Racing in an interview with Capital News 9.

The grandeur of Saratoga and its racing grounds are legendary. The unique charm of Saratoga is the history that presides over the track itself, and part of its allure is the stylistic ambiance of its architecture.

Saratoga Race Course is the oldest continuously-operating Thoroughbred racetrack in the country. Stakes races, such as the Travers (an annual event since 1864), are world famous. Individuals connected with the operation read like a Who's Who: Jerome, Vanderbilt, Whitney, Astor, etc. Despite renovations, the track buildings retain their Victorian architectural character, and constitute an important site in the history of Thoroughbred racing in the United States.

The Race Course property has a wealth of Victorian structures, including the turreted grandstand, and many horse barns dating from 1864. For example, Clare Court, a small, bucolic plot in the backstretch, is the oldest group of barns. These barns housed great Thoroughbred champions including Citation. This enclave was the "summer camp" for the horses of early racing luminaries -- Vanderbilt, Astor, Whitney and others. New construction on the site has, for the most part, been designed to blend with the old.

In total, the Saratoga Race Course comprises 350 acres and one race track; one large workout track; a smaller workout track; dozens of stables; facilities for jockeys; blacksmith shops; living quarters for the manager; dormitories and a recreation center for workers; the grandstand, including the Clubhouse; and paddock. There are over 200 structures on the property. Of these the finest is the Grandstand building, which includes the Clubhouse and its renowned pyramidal roof.

A comparison could be made between Saratoga Race Course and other Thoroughbred race tracks, like Churchill Downs in Kentucky, but Saratoga is unique in its design and in the retention of so much of its original material and traditions. For example, even though modern video technology displays information about races, horses and jockey changes throughout the facility, the infield's original manually-operated jockey weight change boards remain and are still used every day. The original big brass bell in the winner's circle still signals the time for the jockeys to mount their horses in the paddock. It is the

charm of the setting, in concert with these beloved racing traditions that sets Saratoga Race Course apart as the Queen of American Thoroughbred racing.

*“... Saratoga is the place everyone wants to visit for racing.” Cot Campbell,
Director, Concerned Citizens and President, Dogwood Stables*

WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED?

We are at a critical juncture relating to the management of the Saratoga Race Course and the operation of the other two New York-based facilities (known collectively as New York Racing). Management and control of the facilities may change hands after over 50 years as the franchise for operation of New York State horseracing is up for renewal in 2007. Global and national competition will result in increased investment to modernize and expand the track facilities. Ownership of the facilities is in question, and the answer to the question will determine the oversight of changes to the historic setting. The threat to the Saratoga Race Course lies in the uncertainty of these various shifts.

Thoroughbred racing is big business. New York racing faces competition from tracks across the country and around the globe. While a basic level of maintenance has kept the Race Course in good working order, investments have not been made to ensure that the Race Course keeps pace with improvements in racing technology. For example, Polytrack and other synthetic surfaces are now available that make racing safer for horses; Saratoga's track needs this new technology. Advances in gaming and communications technology are likely to be implemented. The approach to modernization will determine whether this significant historic and cultural resource is preserved or destroyed.

The Concerned Citizens for Saratoga Racing, a group of local businesspeople led by the Saratoga Chamber of Commerce, has included the preservation of the Race Course as part of its position paper on the future of the Race Course. As a result of these efforts, the Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Racing, commissioned by the State Legislature, included a requirement that the Race Course be preserved in the Request for Proposal given to prospective franchisees. Each of the prospective franchisees responded with assurances to the Committee that it would preserve the historic architecture at the Race Course.

From the Final Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Racing:

“...At Saratoga, Excelsior views the historical nature of the facility as significant and believes restoration and rehabilitation of the existing ironwork to be important. ...NYRA specifically stated an intention to continue to maintain Saratoga consistent with its historic character.”

If good intentions were sufficient to guarantee the preservation of this unique and valuable historic and cultural site, there would be no threat to Saratoga Race Course. A comparison to Churchill Downs reveals the real threat to Saratoga. Churchill Downs, built in 1883, is recognizable to millions by its graceful twin spires. Surely everyone associated with Churchill Downs recognizes the economic value of the architectural setting. Yet, in

the recent modernization and expansion program completed in 2005, two massive structures were added on either side of the beloved spires to house luxury boxes, new restaurants, catering facilities and other new amenities. As a result, the twin spires, the iconic architectural feature of this historic race course, are dwarfed and rendered visually irrelevant.

PROTECTING AND PRESERVING SARATOGA RACE COURSE



Historic Churchill Downs, Demolition of the Clubhouse, and the spires after New Construction

The essential character of Saratoga Race Course is the composite of historic buildings, landscapes and traditions. The threat to the Race Course lies not only in the wholesale demolition of the Grandstand. Rather, it is small incremental changes, none of which alone would be considered a significant impact—but the aggregate of which presents the greatest threat. If the new management is not well-grounded in its history, then even with the best of intentions, there is a high likelihood of small, inappropriate changes with significant and negative cumulative impact on the character of Saratoga Race Course. An updated inventory of all structures and landscape features is a critical component to protecting the historic site.

From the Final Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Racing:

“...Empire also suggested that an appropriate utilization of Saratoga would be an international car show. In general, Empire also suggested capital improvements to restaurants, banquet and reception space could be utilized on non-racing days for weddings, anniversary parties and other special events...For Saratoga, Excelsior would not schedule off-day events for the grandstand or clubhouse due to their historic nature. Excelsior will establish The Saratoga Center and New York Racing Hall of Fame within a new building located near the Oklahoma training track.”

The Saratoga Race Course is a large facility, and it is expensive to operate. The Saratoga Race Meet is only six-weeks long, but it is the most important meet in all of American racing. As has been true at other racing facilities, to improve the financial viability of the Race Course, we can anticipate that additional uses may be pursued which expand the revenue it generates. The challenge for new management will be to find compatible uses that do not require inappropriate changes to the historic resources. Further, as new revenue opportunities increase the number of people who visit the Race Course, an additional challenge will be to manage the impacts of increased tourism.

The New York Racing Association (NYRA) has asserted ownership of the three track facilities in the State, Belmont, Aqueduct, and Saratoga. The State refutes this claim, and the question of ownership is now for the courts to decide. The question of ownership determines the legal protection of the Race Course as an historic and cultural resource. We need look no further than the recent expansion of the Saratoga Gaming and Raceway facility to understand the need for local participation in the oversight of building programs at the Race Course. The Gaming and Raceway successfully asserted that the City of

Saratoga Springs did not have authority to review or approve its expansion plans because the Racino must get permits from the New York State Lottery, therefore they are a state agency.

If the property is privately owned, local historic zoning regulations will apply. Then, the Saratoga Springs Design Review Commission will provide review and approve any alterations to the historic buildings and new construction at the Race Course. If State-owned, then only State Historic Preservation Act reviews will be done by the State Historic Preservation Office, and there will be no opportunity to block inappropriate changes.

**ADVOCATING A FOUR-PRONGED APPROACH TO BALANCE
MODERNIZATION AND PRESERVATION**

The intent to preserve the historic character of Saratoga Race Course will not be sufficient to ensure that in the course of modernization, the changes to the facilities will not destroy its essential character. We advocate the adoption of a thoughtful, practical planning approach to ensure the long-term preservation of the historic Saratoga Race Course.

To ensure the long-term preservation of the historic resources, a real commitment to doing appropriate planning for both potential modernization and preservation must be secured. The new management of the Race Course must be committed to building a thorough knowledge of the history of the Race Course before beginning to modernize. Second, a comprehensive plan and design guidelines for the modernization and preservation of the Race Course must be put into place and implemented. Finally, proper government oversight—including representatives of the municipality and the State Historic Preservation Office—must be clearly established to ensure the long-term protection of this important historic site.

The Saratoga Springs Preservation Foundation, and its coalition of national and state historic preservation organizations, county and municipal government officials, Thoroughbred industry professionals, and local business people, advocates the following 4-pronged approach be required by the Governor and Legislature in awarding the New York Racing franchise: Inventory, Protect, Plan, Oversee

- 1) **Inventory:** Compile a complete, updated historic resources inventory. This inventory will provide a baseline assessment of all of the historic and cultural resources at the Saratoga Race Course, and identify the condition of each structure and landscape feature. The Saratoga Springs Preservation Foundation will oversee the process to complete the historic resources survey.
- 2) **Protect:** The Saratoga Springs Planning Board and City Council should move to incorporate into the local Union Avenue Historic District all of the buildings and landscaped features of historical, architectural, and cultural significance.
- 3) **Plan:** Prepare a comprehensive facilities management plan with design standards. The new Francishee must prepare a comprehensive facilities management plan addressing both modernization and preservation plans and must include design guidelines, based on the Secretary of the Interior Standards, to be used in the development of individual capital and maintenance projects.
- 3) **Oversee:** Establish a formal oversight process. A formal oversight process is critical to ensure that capital improvements and maintenance projects are done in accordance with the established standards and guidelines and that these projects do not diminish the historic character of the Saratoga Race Course. The oversight process should be assigned to the local Saratoga Springs Design Review Commission.

We urge the Governor and Legislature to take these steps to prevent the ultimate loss of our beloved race course's character, history and tradition.