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**Subject:** [desaixarea] Follow up on Fairgrounds  
**Date:** Sep 16, 2009 9:58 PM

This afternoon was the special meeting of the Fairgrounds Citizens Advisory Committee to discuss preliminary neighborhood response to the Fairgrounds proposal about expansion of their hours. This is the status:

There was a discussion of attendance and responses at the September 10 meeting of the three neighborhood associations. It was explained that the unanimous opinion at the meeting was against the expansion of hours and against the 4th of July event. There was also some discussion about the "low" attendance of about 50 people and whether it was representative of the entire neighborhood.

The Fairgrounds also polled 321 of their customers last week. 72% responded that they would like to see the hours expanded to 24 hours. Around 6-9% responded that they would like the hours expanded to 2:00, 3:00 or 4:00 a.m., respectively. It was not clear whether there was an option that said "no expansion". The Fairgrounds has a substantial client base from the immediate neighborhood. It is not clear how many of the 321 people polled were from the immediate neighborhood.

No plan for future action in the immediate future was made. There was discussion of a professional, neutral poll being taken. Or making other efforts to get responses from a broader base of the neighborhood. Another option was that the Fairgrounds would come up with a detailed, specific plan for the expansion and present it to the city council and/or at some advertised, public forums.

There was also a request by the Fairgrounds that it be clarified that some of the comments on the FSJ website about the 9/10 meeting, were personal, individual responses to the proposal, and not the opinion of any of the organizations as a whole.

There are no other meetings on this issue planned at this time. The next regular, quarterly meeting of the Fairgrounds Citizen Advisory Committee is November 10. We will keep everyone posted with any news on this issue.

## **Midnight is late enough for slots at New Orleans' Fair Grounds**

**Posted by [The Times-Picayune editorial page staff](#)**

**September 14, 2009 6:12AM**



Chris Granger / The Times-Picayune

The Fair Grounds is located in the middle of a New Orleans historic neighborhood.

The owners of the Fair Grounds [want to keep slot machines on until 4 a.m.](#), but that would be unfair to Faubourg St. John and other neighborhoods near the track. The New Orleans City Council shouldn't allow expanded hours.

Residents fear the crime, traffic and other ills that would come from allowing gambling to continue into the early morning hours. Those are valid concerns. While other racetracks in the state have 24-hour slots, they are not located in the middle of a historic residential neighborhood.

Track officials argue that crime in the area hasn't increased since [hundreds of slot machines were introduced in 2005](#). And they suggest that a 4 a.m. closing time would mean less traffic because people would leave over a longer period of time instead of exiting en masse at midnight.

But there's no guarantee that traffic would be eased by longer hours, and it's reasonable to anticipate more crime, litter, noise and disorderliness if gamblers are allowed to keep playing until 4 a.m.

The midnight closing time is the price that the Fair Grounds had to pay to get slot machines approved at the track. The owners argued for 24-hour slots back in 2005 but backed down when they encountered strong opposition. Now, they're trying to chip away at that compromise. Opponents fear that the ultimate goal is 24-hour gambling, and it's easy to see why they think so.

The Fair Grounds is trying to make its proposal more palatable by promising to create a beautification fund and replace more frequently two New Orleans Police Department patrol cars used in the area. The track also has proposed trying the longer hours on a trial basis.

The owners have even tried to paint this as an economic development boon that will create jobs.

But a few flower beds and new patrol cars can't protect the character of this neighborhood from the tentacles of expanded gambling. The City Council and the Fair Grounds' neighbors made it quite clear just four years ago how much they are willing to tolerate. Nothing has happened to make a "racino" more acceptable in the intervening years, and the City Council should make sure that the original agreement stands.

## **Proposed Fair Grounds slot machine hour extension faces fight from neighbors**

**by Danny Monteverde and Bruce Egler, The Times-Picayune**

**Thursday September 10, 2009, 11:47 PM**



Chris Granger/The

Times-Picayune Neighborhood residents ride their bikes down Fortin Street on Thursday next to the Fair Grounds. Track officials have proposed keeping its slots casino open as late as 4 a.m., which is drawing opposition from in the neighborhood.

When the New Orleans City Council, after nearly seven hours of sometimes heated debate, voted in June 2005 to allow the installation of hundreds of slot machines at the Fair Grounds, it decreed that the machines must be turned off at midnight.

Now the issue of the closing hour is back and once more riling up residents of Faubourg St. John and other neighborhoods near the historic Gentilly Boulevard racetrack.

The Fair Grounds has proposed keeping its slots casino open as late as 4 a.m.

On Thursday evening, leaders of the Faubourg St. John, Fair Grounds Triangle and DeSaix Area neighborhood associations met to gather residents' reactions to the proposed change and to the Fair Grounds' proposal to present a 4th of July celebration at the track.

Neither idea seemed to sit well with most residents, with crime and traffic being two key concerns.

"There's no reason to expand," said Cynthia Scott, who lives in Faubourg St. John. "The provisos (imposed by the council) are the price they pay for having a casino in our neighborhood."

The revenue from the slot machines is vital to keeping the Fair Grounds open and attracting top-flight horses, trainers and jockeys, operators say.

Churchill Downs, owner of the track, originally sought permission to operate slots around the clock, but it backed off that position in 2005 in the face of strong opposition from many neighbors and city officials.

Scott and others said they fear letting the casino stay open longer would be like opening Pandora's box.

"We've given as much as we can," said Pat McDonald Fowler. "It's not only 'no,' it's 'hell no.'"

All other racetracks in the state have 24-hour slots, but Fair Grounds critics say none of those is in the middle of a historic residential neighborhood.

They fear that giving the racetrack casino, or "racino," expanded hours might attract so many new gamblers that it would worsen traffic, late-night noise and crime problems in their neighborhoods.

Track officials have said police statistics have not shown a rise in crime in the area since the slots casino opened, so neighbors' original fears should be eased.

They also said the midnight closing hour means there is a large exodus of customers at that hour, creating a spurt of traffic in the neighborhood, while a later closing hour would help spread the traffic over a longer period.

The Fair Grounds has suggested allowing a later closing for a few months to a year to see how the expanded hours worked.

In return, track officials said, they would establish a fund to be used for neighborhood projects such as parks and beautification. They also offered to replace the two cars the New Orleans Police Department uses to patrol the area around the track more frequently than was provided under the 2005 agreement.

But Georgia Carey, who lives on Onzaga Street near the track, said she's seen little involvement by the Fair Grounds in the surrounding neighborhood and wants to see more concern for the area before allowing any concessions.



"Why can't they adopt a few streets?" she said. "A party every now and then isn't worth it," she said of the proposed 4th of July celebration.

Besides allowing the track to increase its revenue from a crucial part of its operations, Fair Grounds officials have said, the later hours would create more jobs.

However, some neighbors fear the track's ultimate goal is a 24-hour casino. Some also allege the Fair Grounds has not kept promises it made to appease neighbors' complaints during the racing season about traffic, noise and other problems. They said the track should fulfill those promises before being granted expanded hours.

Any change in the closing hours for the slots operation would require action by the City Council. The track is in Councilwoman Shelley Midura's district.

The Legislature voted in 2003 to authorize slots at the Fair Grounds, and Orleans Parish voters approved the plan by a wide margin in a referendum that year. But the state law and the referendum did not change the city's zoning law, which made no provision for slot machines, requiring action by the council before the slots operation could begin.

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<http://www.gamingtoday.com/industry-news/story.bv?storyid=22810>

**Article below from the "Gaming Today" website.**

## **Wagering declines increase pressure on non-slots tracks**

(September 08, 2009 7:09 AM) -

**Industry Insider by Ray Poirier |**

Support for horse racing continued to decline in August, with wagering falling nationally by 12.35 percent, but the decline is being felt more at racetracks that are forced to compete with racinos that are subsidized by revenue from slot machines.

And that underscores the problem in Kentucky, the Bluegrass State and home of the Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs.

"Our tracks," said Bob Evans, CEO of Churchill Downs Inc. (CHDN), "are competing at a substantial disadvantage" against tracks located in states that have authorized video lottery terminals (VLTs).

But, in a stinging commentary delivered before the Louisville, Kentucky, Rotary Club last week, Senate President David Williams lashed out at the management of Churchill Downs saying, "those running the track are not racing people, they're slot machine people."

It's that difference of opinion, as well as strong opposition from church groups and others, that has kept the state out of the slot machine business.

"Corporations sometimes lose their way," said Williams, whose opposition to a slots bill has kept it from being considered in the senate. "And the folks that lead Churchill Downs now are not racing people, they're slot machines people."

However, in Kentucky, Churchill Downs is not alone in trying to compete against tracks whose higher purses have been a major draw for horses.

Ron Geary, owner of Ellis Park in Henderson, Kentucky, is considering shutting down the facility that has been in operation for 88 years. He says he can't afford to stay open unless Kentucky lawmakers allow the tracks to supplement their purses with revenues from VLTs.

As he ponders whether to pack it in, Geary remarked, "I don't know which is more dependable: handicapping horses or handicapping what our state legislature is going to do. In effect, surrounding states have taken – or stolen – our horse business."

Noting that horsemen were shipping their horses to nearby Hoosier Park in Indiana, Geary lamented, "From our perspective, it's not a really positive future ahead of us."

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September 4, 2009

## Ellis Park shutting down? Well, ...

*By Gregory A. Hall*  
*ghall@courier-journal.com*

Ellis Park owner Ron Geary is sounding far less sure about closing his Henderson, Ky., racetrack this fall — a threat he made earlier this year as legislators debated whether to allow video lottery terminals at tracks.

"I'm still evaluating everything," Geary said in a recent interview. "There's like 12 things I'm trying to quantify as best I can so I can make the most informed decision for the Kentucky thoroughbred horse industry, for Ellis Park fans, for myself financially and my family financially as to what's the prudent thing to do."

Geary had said before that without money from the gambling machines, which are similar to slots, he would have no hope of reversing millions of dollars in annual losses. He said he's been losing the competition for gamblers and horses lured by other states' casino games and fatter purses funded with alternative gambling revenue.

But even though the legislature didn't pass an alternative gambling law and Geary says he's still losing money and horses to other tracks, he now says he is considering racing next year after a stronger than expected summer meet that concludes Monday. He'll decide within the next few weeks.

Opponents of expanded gambling said Geary's uncertainty is proof that the horse industry is overstating the risks of not passing slots legislation.

"Using intimidation and fear tactics to try to force the legislature to approve slot machines is unconscionable and we always had our doubts about whether these threats would become reality or not," said David Edmunds, a spokesman for the Family Foundation of Kentucky. "And it's clear that they were just that — they were threats."

Senate President David Williams, who opposed the slots bill during this year's special session, declined to comment about the possibility Ellis would stay open.

But Geary, who acknowledges that he repeatedly said Ellis would close without slots legislation, said he wasn't bluffing — and if he keeps Ellis open, he's simply betting that expanded gambling will be approved eventually.

Geary, who retired as president of Louisville-based care provider ResCare, said he has lost millions annually since he bought Ellis from Churchill Downs Inc. in 2006.

He said in a 2008 court filing that Ellis lost \$2.7 million the year before. He's since said his losses have amounted to about \$2.5 million a year, and he expects to take another loss this year, despite the stronger meet.

Staying open would mean “that as an entrepreneur-risk taker that I’d be willing to incur another couple million dollars of loss in hopes that the Kentucky state Senate would pass appropriate alternative gaming,” he said.

Gov. Steve Beshear, who won the 2007 campaign while running in favor of expanding gambling in Kentucky to help the horse industry, said he doesn’t believe a flip-flop by Geary would make it more difficult to get the legislative support needed to pass slots in the future.

“I hope that Ron will keep Ellis Park open,” Beshear said in Louisville Aug. 27. “I know he’s losing money, but I’m hoping that he can find some way to make it work, continue to make it work, because we need those tracks in Kentucky. But the hardships that they’re going through right now are very real.”

Closing Ellis would cost 75 year-round workers their jobs, plus 350 more during racing, and likely mean an end to a year-round circuit that allowed trainers to stay busy at five thoroughbred tracks in the state. Trainers already say they’re looking for richer purses in other states much of the year and closing Ellis only would exacerbate the circuit’s decline.

Geary followed through on a threat, if only briefly, to close once before. Last year during a dispute with horsemen over revenues from account wagering, Ellis closed for a week before the two sides settled the issue.

Geary first told the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission in March that this year’s Ellis meet would be the track’s last unless expanded gambling at racetracks was approved.

Beshear picked up on that statement during a news conference after he called the legislature into special session in June to consider a bill on the issue.

And the plight of Ellis was part of the horse industry’s pitch in seeking support from legislators.

After the bill failed, Geary repeated his intention to close Ellis when Williams asserted that the proposal wouldn’t pass in 2010 either.

Since then, Geary and horsemen say Ellis benefited from a decision to run fewer races this summer.

Geary received permission from the commission in April to run 23 days this summer rather than the customary 48, to minimize overlap with Indiana tracks that were expected to offer higher purses.

One of those Indiana tracks, Hoosier Park Racing Casino, about a four-hour drive to the north, started out with purses averaging \$190,000 a day this summer, up from \$142,000 a day in 2008, and recently increased daily offerings by 12 percent, citing slots revenues.

With fewer days of racing, average daily purse money at Ellis is \$145,000, about the same as last year. Average attendance has been higher with racing primarily on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

“We’re having as good a meet as we can scratch out,” Geary said.

The reduced racing schedule has allowed Ellis to average more than nine horses per race, up from last year. Larger field sizes tend to attract more wagering because of the possibility better odds will result from betting being split among more horses.

While Geary knew reducing dates would help keep purses even with last year, he said he didn't know whether it would be enough to get the horses to fill the races.

Geary said scheduling more turf races than normal to take advantage of Hoosier's lack of a grass course also brought in additional horses.

And Fairmount Park in Collinsville, Ill., which normally competes with Ellis for some horses, closed this summer because a casino-subsidy for Illinois tracks is tied up in court.

With those unexpected results, Geary decided during the meet to add five Friday cards, something he had pledged to consider when the commission approved the reduction in April.

While the meet hasn't gone as poorly as Geary anticipated, he said the track is still a money loser.

"Nobody's crying wolf here," said William "Buff" Bradley, who was led the trainer standings entering Friday's races at the current Ellis meet. "I mean it's bad."

Had Ellis run the normal amount of days that horsemen normally would expect, purses would have been drastically reduced, said Marty Maline, the executive director of the Kentucky Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association, an owners and trainers group that supports expanded gambling to help racing.

And several trainers who were Ellis regulars bypassed the track for Delaware Park, which has expanded gambling.

"I don't think that anyone really could question that Ellis Park is on their last legs," Maline said.

Maline said shortened meets like this year's aren't the long-term solution, echoing a long-held horsemen's desire for as much racing as possible to give trainers and their owners chances to make money.

"You can't have a steady diet of weekend racing," he said. "You've got have more of a race meet if you want to contend with other racetracks like Hoosier."

Luella Wagner, of Evansville, said her family has had a box at the track since it opened in the early 1920s. She goes every day, and still takes her 98-year-old father on Sundays.

"We never know what's going to happen ... Last year we thought was it and we were so sad and now this year," she said.

She hopes she'll be back in her second-row grandstand box next year.

"It'll kill me," she said of a possible closure. "Part of my life is to go out to Ellis Park."

Reporter Gregory A. Hall can be reached at (502) 582-4087.

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<http://www.wkyt.com/wymtnews/headlines/57405242.html?storySection=story>

NOTE: Churchill Downs owns the New Orleans Fairgrounds slots facility.

From WKYT-TV in Lexington, KY

Posted: 7:08 PM Sep 4, 2009

## Sen. Williams upset at Churchill Downs officials about slot machines

Kentucky Senate president David Williams is lashing out at Churchill Downs officials for pushing for more gambling options.

Kentucky [Senate](#) president David Williams is lashing out at Churchill Downs officials for pushing for more gambling options.

Speaking in [Louisville](#), Williams said those running the track are not racing people, they're slot machine people.

The republican says slots at the home of the [Kentucky Derby](#) would take money away from the poor and attention away from horses.

The senate defeated a slots bill earlier this year that passed the house with a push from Governor Beshear.

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<http://www.wfpl.org/2009/09/03/williams-slots-would-be-tax-on-the-poor/>

WFPL 89.3 FM Louisville, KY

### ***Williams: Slots Would Be "Tax On The Poor"***

Rick Howlett September 3, 2009, 4:34 pm

Kentucky Senate President David Williams says allowing slot machines at the state's racetracks would amount to a 'tax on the poor,' that would cause more problems than it would solve. The Republican from Burkesville was the speaker at Thursday's Rotary Club of Louisville luncheon.

Democratic Governor Steve Beshear and the racing industry have been trying to push a bill through the General Assembly that would allow expanded gambling at horse tracks. The most recent legislation failed to clear a state Senate committee this year. Williams says the people who are most likely to play slots at Churchill Downs and other tracks are those who can least afford it.

"It's going to hurt the people in the west end of Louisville. It's going to hurt people in the south end of Louisville, the very areas that you're talking about going into the schools and helping those folks. There are not very many people in Prospect that are going to play those slot machines, there are not very many people that go to the homes where they have Homearama are going to go down there and play those slot machines," Williams said.

Officials at Churchill Downs and other Kentucky tracks say slots revenue is critical to their future, as they're unable to compete with facilities in states where casino games allow them to offer higher racing purses.

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September 1, 2009

## Casino deal would give Churchill tax cut in Florida

*The Courier-Journal*

Churchill Downs Inc.'s planned slots parlor at its South Florida track is in line for a boost even before its planned opening next year.

Calder Casino & Race Course, the new name for Churchill's Miami-area track, would benefit from a 35 percent tax rate – instead of the current 50 percent – because of a revenue-sharing deal reached Monday between Florida Gov. Charlie Crist and the Seminole Tribe that operates casinos in the state.

But the compact between Florida and the tribe still needs legislative approval, which may be difficult because of concessions made by Crist, according to legislators' comments in published reports about Monday's deal. The compact would prevent slots or blackjack at pari-mutuel facilities outside Broward and Miami-Dade counties.

Churchill is constructing a slots parlor and poker room at Calder, which is in Miami-Dade. The 29-table poker club is targeted to open late next month. The slots facility is scheduled to open in January.

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## Ponies aren't all you can play at the Fair Grounds this season

Posted by [Angus Lind, Columnist, The Times-Picayune](#) November 14, 2008  
5:05AM

Categories: [Living: Columnists](#)



Ted Jackson / The Times-Picayune Austin Miller, President of Fairgrounds Racecourse poses in front of the new slots. The Fairgrounds opens Friday, Nov. 14.

Can the shiny new Fair Grounds casino with its 600 whirring, ringing, blinking slot machines somehow attract new horse-racing fans?

History says no but maybe it will. Long shots do come in once in a while. So perhaps someone sitting at a slot machine, listening to all the beeps and buzzes and digital music arpeggios will stick his head out of the door and say, "Hey, they got daylight out here and horses you can bet on!"

And he will go buy a program, bet on a winner and get hooked on a great sport that desperately needs new and younger fans.

When the Fair Grounds Race Course & Slots opens today in Gentilly, it will be the 137th season for the horses and horse racing fans, the first for a full-blown slot machine casino and the folks who like to pull on the one-armed bandits.

"Racinos" is what some people call this semi-reluctant convenient marriage of horse racing and casinos. The slots revenue is designed to increase purses, the higher purses are designed to lure better horses, jockeys, trainers and owners, and the enhanced racing is designed to attract more fans and establish the Fair Grounds as one of the top winter meets in the country.

Not everybody is of this opinion, however.

"Sure, slots have helped purses but I doubt if a single slotaholic has been turned into a fan of the turf," said Folsom horse owner-breeder-trainer Tim Rice of Innisfree Farm. "If you showed porno movies at the New Orleans Public Library, what chance would you give that the film clientele would end up checking out Dickens and Faulkner?"

None, I'd say.



Ted Jackson / The Times-Picayune

Workers prepare the food for the lunch crowd in the new cafeteria at the Fair Grounds Racetrack.

Five decades of watching this sport tell me this: The typical race-horse players are not going to the track to play the machines, they are tolerating them because they know it's helping their sport. If you go to the casino and wind up betting on the ponies, that's a plus.

On another note, New Orleans is a traditional city and sadly, an old New Orleans tradition will fade into the sunset: This season will mark the first time since the very early days of the nation's third oldest track that it has not opened on Thanksgiving Day.

Churchill Downs, the owner of the Fair Grounds, made this tradition-breaking decision that may turn out to be applauded by some -- if and only if service is improved for the large crowd that usually gathers on Turkey Day and overwhelms the wait staff, which changes yearly. A two-weekend shakedown cruise should help to get the kinks out and eliminate bettors having to stand in line 40 minutes for a corned beef and a beer. That's the company spin.

Others see six extra days of racing, six more than last year, providing more bucks for a bottom-line business.

In addition to the new slots and the new opening date, there are some new looks around the track. The main entrance off Gentilly Boulevard has been revamped, repaved and lined with attractive new landscaping, palm trees and flowers. The paddock -- maybe the best place in the city to hang out on a bluebird day and watch the horses come in to be saddled -- has been spruced up. The fencing around the perimeter of the Fair Grounds property is now all wrought iron, a more pleasing, New Orleans look.

A new, very large second-floor grandstand buffet has booths and tables, and the casino has two more places to chow down: the Gentilly Grill and the DeSaix Deli. The casino also has horsy signage, with "Trifecta Treasures," "Backstretch Riches," "Jockey Jackpot" and "Fair Grounds Fortunes" at different locations throughout the facility.

There are betting machines to play the horses and TV monitors to watch races in the casino, but there are no slots in the grandstand or clubhouse.

For high-rolling racetrackers, there is now a plush VIP Gold Room on the ground floor near the paddock, where the old gift shop was. Comfy sofas, carpeting and stylish upscale betting carrels await those gambling the big bucks. The downsized gift shop has moved next door. Also, new AmTote betting machines and upgraded TV monitors are throughout the track.

Disappointing are the Fair Grounds commercials both on TV and in print that show a guy dressed up as a jockey clowning around with slot machines... and not a single sign of a horse.

Maybe that's small stuff, maybe not. They blow the bugle today for the first time this season, and for horseplayers, there's nothing small about that brassy sound announcing the horses coming onto the track for the post parade. Hopefully, the Churchill brass that oversees the Fair Grounds will focus on racing and make every day a fun experience for the first-timer who ventures there... and comes back a second time, a satisfied customer.

Columnist Angus Lind can be reached at [alind@timespicayune.com](mailto:alind@timespicayune.com) or at 504.826.3449.

## Slot machines bring boost to horse racing at Fair Grounds

Posted by [Bob Fortus, The Times-Picayune](#) November 08, 2008 5:27PM

Categories: [Fair Grounds](#)



Alexander Barkoff photo  
The addition of slot machines has allowed the Fair Grounds to increase purses for this season's meet, which begins Friday.

Horses will be off and running Friday on opening day at the Fair Grounds, and slot machines will be ringing on the opening of the track's permanent slots facility. With a boost from slots revenue, Fair Grounds purses are increasing. Many of the nation's top horses, jockeys, trainers and owners will be competing for the money this season.

To enhance the racing is the purpose of having slots at the track, say officials of the Fair Grounds and its parent company, Churchill Downs Inc.

The racing, they say, is the focus of the Fair Grounds.

"All the preparation we've made, if that doesn't tell you we're interested in racing and want to have the best, I don't know any other way to say it," said Donnie Richardson, Churchill's senior vice president of racing. "Our emphasis is on racing. I'm not going to say they won't promote the slots parlor. If we can get great racing and great slots, we're going to have to turn people away . . ."

But some racing people are skeptical about the track's focus.

In August, veteran racing official Randy Soth unexpectedly and with little explanation departed as Fair Grounds president after almost four years on the job.

Former casino executive Austin Miller, who had been the Fair Grounds' vice president/general manager of slots and OTB operations, took over as head of the entire operation. Late last month, Churchill named Miller president of the Fair Grounds and announced the hiring of Eric Halstrom, who had been a vice president at Canterbury Park, as the Fair Grounds' vice president/general manager of racing.

The change from Soth to Miller as the man in charge at the Fair Grounds sparked concern among some in racing that the track might be emphasizing the slots over the sport.

"Slots, frankly, that's a very important part of the operation," said Bob Wright, a member and former chairman of the Louisiana State Racing Commission. "I'm not saying they shouldn't do what's necessary to improve that side of the operation, but not at the expense of the racing side. Dismissing Randy gave me the impression, the way he was dismissed or he left, gave me the impression that they might be diminishing the racing side. But the jury's still out."

At a commission meeting in August, Wright questioned Miller about whether racing at the Fair Grounds might be taking a back seat to slots. After suggesting that the commission might be wise to consider giving the Fair Grounds a one- or two-year racing license -- a trial period to show the track's direction -- Wright joined in a unanimous vote approving the track's application for the usual 10-year license.

"My remarks should not be taken as adverse to Churchill, but to show we want to keep them in line," Wright said. "If they need to do what they need to do to improve the racing side, that's good. I hope they continue to do a good job on the racing side, and let's give them the benefit of the doubt."

Said Miller: "I think what Mr. Wright or anybody who wonders about our direction or focus on racing is if you just focus on the top-level pieces -- that's a gaming guy, and they got rid of a racing guy. But with our current staff, there's a tremendous supporting cast. In addition, we're bringing in an additional seasoned veteran to oversee our racing operation."

Soth's departure from the Fair Grounds came shortly after Ken Dunn, who for 18 years had been president of Calder, left that Churchill-owned track. Calder, which is in Miami, has been approved to operate slot machines. In an April release announcing that Dunn would be stepping down, Churchill executive vice president Steve Sexton said: "We are transitioning Calder into a destination with horse racing and casino-style gaming and have need for management skills and leadership experience in both areas."

Soth and Dunn said they can't comment on anything related to Churchill Downs Inc.

New Orleans-born trainer Tom Amoss viewed their departures together as a possible indicator of company priorities. Last month, before Halstrom's hiring was announced, Amoss said: "The fact that they let Kenny Dunn go in Florida plus Randy Soth at the Fair Grounds, replacing him with a casino executive, makes me nervous. I will give Churchill the benefit of the doubt, but the moves that they have made with their staffing suggest just that, that they are more concerned with their casino business than their racing."

Halstrom's hiring pleased Amoss but didn't eliminate his skepticism. "I think it's an encouraging sign that Churchill has filled a strictly racing position (at the Fair Grounds), " Amoss said. "I was one of the skeptical people. We'll see. I'm still skeptical, but I see this hiring as a step in the right direction."

Wright said that his concerns remain despite Halstrom's hiring. "We'll see how it develops, " Wright said.

In an e-mail, Churchill senior vice president of communication and national public affairs Kevin Flanery expressed the company's view on the relationship between racing and slots.

"Churchill Downs Incorporated has a long history of excellence in the racing industry, " Flanery wrote. "The synergy between racing and other gaming options is important to the entire racing industry. The ability to strengthen the racing product, which is the core of our business, is exciting for our company. As we move forward, we will continue to focus on providing quality racing."

"A core component of quality racing is providing a purse structure that is attractive to horsemen. Fortunately, the Fair Grounds has been granted authority to operate slot machines and video poker machines. Revenue from both slots and video poker has enabled our racing team to make some bold changes to the upcoming meet purse structure. These changes will help position Fair Grounds as one of the top winter meets in the United States."

Last season, Fair Grounds purses averaged \$342,607 per day. This season, purses will average about \$375,000 per day, Miller said. Overnight purses (for races excluding stakes) will average about \$300,000 per day, a 20 percent increase from last season. The track will offer 63 stakes races with purses totaling more than \$6.6 million.

"The way we approached this year, we took money out of the stakes program (about \$1.8 million) and put it in the day-to-day purses, " Richardson said.

Miller said: "We maintained the integrity of our marquee races."

Purses for the Louisiana Derby (\$600,000), Fair Grounds Oaks (\$400,000), New Orleans Handicap (\$500,000) and Mervin Muniz Memorial Handicap (\$500,000) -- the track's Grade II races -- haven't changed.

Purse money will be spread across a longer season. Opening this season before Thanksgiving, the traditional opening day, the Fair Grounds will run 87 days, six more than last season.

The new slots facility, which will open with 600 machines, is part of a roughly \$30 million project that also includes two restaurants, a buffet area and a simulcasting area. The temporary slots facility, which was in the building originally opened for off-track betting, had 250 machines.

In the first year of slots at the Fair Grounds (from Sept. 19, 2007, through August), the machines generated about \$285,000 per month to purses, according to Louisiana Gaming Control Board statistics. Purse supplements for thoroughbred races averaged about \$200,000 per month. By law, 15 percent of slots revenue goes to purses, 70 percent for thoroughbreds and 30 percent to quarter horses.

Slots revenue is expected to increase sharply because of the new facility, although Miller wouldn't speculate by how much.

Money draws horses. The Fair Grounds has about 1,800 stalls in its barns, and trainers applied for stalls for about 3,500 horses, new racing secretary Jason Boulet said.

Last season, the Fair Grounds averaged 8.6 horses per race. Richardson said increasing field sizes is a goal. "I want to see nine, 10, 11 in there, " he said.

Steve Asmussen, Amoss and most of the other top-ranking trainers from recent Fair Grounds seasons will be back. Several newcomers, including such successful trainers as Doug O'Neill, Wally Dollase, Anthony Dutrow, Steve Klesaris, Dale Romans, Steve Margolis, Greg Foley and Shannon Ritter, will add depth to the ranks.

"Fair Grounds is doing a lot of good things, " said Romans, a Kentucky trainer who will have a stable in New Orleans for the first time in many years. "The purses are getting bigger. Florida (Gulfstream Park) is going in the other direction. It was time to give it a try."

Mark Casse, the leading trainer at Woodbine near Toronto, had a winter base at the Fair Grounds last season for first time. Casse sees slots, which helped increase purses at Woodbine, as nothing but a positive for the Fair Grounds. "It seems like this year they're going to have the best race meet ever, " he said. "You're going to have more money. More people want to come there than ever." Casse also said that as the racing improves, people at simulcast outlets across North America will bet more money on Fair Grounds races. "That's what happened to Woodbine, " he said.

Trainer Al Stall Jr., a New Orleans native, said he doesn't think that the Fair Grounds will emphasize slots over racing. "I think it's strictly a racetrack, " Stall said. "The demographic that Churchill has for the slots is not trying to get truckers off the interstate. The demographic is more local New Orleans types. It's definitely a racetrack, maybe more than any other track with slots."

Local trainer Andy Leggio said: "As far as I'm concerned, racetracks have turned into slots parlors instead of the other way around. The only reason we're here is they need us to run. Without us, they can't operate the slots. Churchill Downs is noted for racing. They want big-time racing (at the Fair Grounds). They had it last year. The slots will enhance all that. Hopefully, I'm around to get some of that money."

Churchill's decision to open the Fair Grounds barn area early is evidence of the company's focus on racing, Boulet said. After the Evangeline Downs meet ended in early September, several trainers who had participated in that meet were scrambling to find places to send their horses. The Fair Grounds opened as a temporary training center until the barn area officially opened in mid-October for horses assigned stalls for the meet.

"That's something that shows the commitment of Churchill, " said Boulet, who was Evangeline's racing secretary before coming to the Fair Grounds. "The horsemen were in a bind in Lafayette. We had about 200 horses that had nowhere to go."

Sean Alfortish, president of the Louisiana Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association, said that the early opening of the Fair Grounds meet provides more evidence of Churchill's commitment to Louisiana racing and Louisiana horsemen. "They have not given me any indication that their commitment to racing has diminished in any capacity, " Alfortish said.

Amoss raised another issue -- fan experience at the Fair Grounds -- that will shed light on whether the track and parent company are putting proper focus on racing.

"Is the Fair Grounds going to make the racing experience for the fan what it should be?" he asked. "That in the end will determine whether the Fair Grounds has a great meet or not. It won't be the horses. That's a given. My fear is the Fair Grounds will have a great meet from the standpoint of the purses, that great horses will race there, but if the fan experience is no good, the fan base will erode.

"I don't know if racetracks in general or Churchill in particular realize that if the fan experience is good, they'll get new fans and new customers. There are people who will go every day to the track no matter what. There's a larger percentage of people out there that you can capture. It's a matter of the fans being comfortable, enjoying the experience."

Miller said he's focusing on that goal. "In many ways, me being new to racing is probably a good thing, " he said. "I have no pre-conceived notion about what the experience is like. I can ask (racing) questions without people thinking I'm crazy. One of our challenges is to grow our customer base.

"I look at the opportunity with racing, there's a lot of parallels to live poker. Ten years ago, casinos were closing down live poker rooms at an alarming rate. Poker has become sexy. It's attractive to young people, attractive to women, to people of all ages. Racing, it's an entertainment experience. It's a good way to spend the day. Attractive, colorful, high energy -- it's all of those."

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