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Ontario racing fights back

Friday, February 24, 2012 - by Karen Briggs, USTA Web Newsroom Senior Correspondent



Karen Briggs

Toronto, ON --- Ontario horsepeople, their livelihoods threatened by a recent announcement from the provincial government, made their voices heard at Queen's Park, the seat of the provincial legislature in Toronto, on Wednesday (Feb. 22).

An estimated 600 concerned citizens, all employed by the racing industry directly or indirectly, rallied in front of the building to express their disbelief that Ontario's Liberal government, led by Premier Dalton McGuinty, was considering pulling the plug on a deal which has been in place since the late 1990s, and has benefited both the racing industry and provincial coffers.

More than 20 horse trailers slowly circled Queen's Park while some 25 speakers from the provincial Conservative and New Democratic parties, as well as the racing industry, spoke of the mutually beneficial partnership that resulted when Ontario racetracks agreed to house slot machine parlors owned by the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation, in exchange for 20 percent of the slots revenue being funnelled into purses. The remaining 75 percent goes to the government, with five percent allocated to municipalities where slots parlors are located.



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The bulk of the attendees, who travelled from as far away as Windsor, Sudbury and Sarnia, represented the Standardbred industry, but Thoroughbred and racing Quarter Horse industry reps were also on hand, since all three branches of racing are threatened by the recommendation, last week, by provincial economist Don Drummond that the "subsidy" to Ontario horse racing might better be used to fund health care.

Finance minister Dwight Duncan announced earlier this month that the Ontario government will review the C\$345 million allotted to racing in the province each year through the slots-at-racetracks

partnership.

"To put that annual subsidy in perspective, it's more support than we provide for water protection or road safety," Duncan said in his speech at the time.

The word "subsidy" has since become a hot button for the racing industry, with Ontario Harness Horse Association president Brian Tropea calling it "false, misleading and highly offensive to the people who rely on racing to feed their families" in his Queen's Park speech Wednesday. "We are simply calling on the Ontario government to honor the existing agreement."



Karen Briggs photos

Driver Anthony MacDonald spoke to the crowd at the rally.

Driver Anthony MacDonald gave a short but affecting speech to the crowd, explaining how he travelled from his native Prince Edward Island to Quebec as a young man, seeking to make a living in the racing industry. When the racing industry collapsed in that province a few years ago, thanks to a similar government pull-out, he moved on to Ontario, where he has enjoyed considerable success, while a good friend in Montreal "has been driving a cab since Blue Bonnets closed.

"That friend called me the other day," he added. "He's now scared for me.



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“Am I to drive a cab? Racing is the only way I know how to make a living. I'm not here just as a horseman; I'm here as a terrified Ontario citizen. Mr. McGuinty, save our livelihoods, save our industry, save our lives.”

An estimated 60,000 jobs hang in the balance as the Ontario government pauses with its axe in the air -- not counting all of racing's secondary industries, from feed suppliers to equine veterinarians, farriers, manufacturers of harness and equipment, even tractor and truck dealers. Ontario has racetracks in 17 municipalities, all of which experience increased business thanks to racing.

Not mentioned during the rally was the other elephant in the room, which is what happens to the value of Ontario-bred horses -- currently some of the most desirable on the North American market -- should the province pull the plug on racing.

Said Ted Chudleigh, the member of provincial parliament for Halton region (which includes the Woodbine Entertainment Group's Mohawk oval), “This Liberal government reacts to public opinion, more so than any government in my memory.

“This rally will be in the media across the province, and that will influence this government. They can't stand up against public opinion, especially when they're wrong.”

To that end, the National Capital Region Harness Horsemen's Association is now planning a second rally in front of Dalton McGuinty's Ottawa offices on Wednesday (Feb. 29). Standardbred Canada, the Ontario Horse Racing Industry Association and other industry groups are also encouraging horsepeople to keep up an e-mail barrage to their MPPs, municipal mayors and McGuinty, to keep visibility for this issue high.

The Ontario government will announce its 2012 budget, presumably including the fate of the racing industry, in six to eight weeks' time.

Editor's Note: The views contained in this column are that of the author alone, and do not necessarily represent the opinions or views of the United States Trotting Association.

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