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Deadline to end slots at tracks arrives March 31

By Jeff Doner

As days pass by on the calendar, the lifeline of the horse racing industry hangs in the balance as the slots at racetracks program is set to end March 31, officially marking the last day the industry will receive revenue from the slots.

Although there are deals being struck to ensure racing will continue to operate at various locations, some are concerned the deals are short-term and do not offer enough stability.

Sue Leslie, president of the Ontario Horse Racing Industry Association (OHRIA), is appreciative of the short-term deals being reached, but said the long-term viability of the industry is still threatened.

?The arrangements with the race tracks are still not done and the ones that have been negotiated are only for two years. Breeding is a five-year cycle,? Leslie explained.

?I think the transition panel is trying hard, but everything is short-term and temporary. The integration of racing into gaming, what does that mean? Does that mean in a month we're going to have a new revenue stream? Or does that mean in two years we're going to be given the minimal amount, a revenue stream that may not come anywhere near the industry's needs? We don't know what it means.?

The three-person transition panel was established by the government to explore what the industry needs to survive without the slots at racetracks program.

While setting out some recommendations to the government, Leslie said it simply hasn't been enough to encourage people to invest in the industry to help it survive and grow.

?The announcement by the premier that she was integrating horse racing and breeding into the gaming strategy was very welcome and very much appreciated, but the problem is without the details of what that means, it's not giving any confidence to people to invest in our industry. We've got nobody wanting to buy or breed horses,? said Leslie. ?There's been a little bit of hope given with the premier, but there's just not enough substance to encourage anyone to invest.?

York-Simcoe MPP Julia Munro said she has been hearing concerns from her constituents about the issue and said there has not been enough clarity on what the government's plan is.

?The manner in which the whole thing was done I think is something that is counter to what we all believe in, in terms of consultation and any kind of process,? she said.

?To me, people should have the courtesy of having a conversation and having meetings of understanding some of the issues, none of that was done and so this was just really having their lives turned around and they did nothing wrong. The question of people coming to the table now ? and obviously you can argue better late than never ? but it's a dreadful way to deal with other people.?

Munro supported Leslie's assertion that there are many questions that still need to be answered.

?They still feel very much in the dark in terms of how this is all going to play out,? she said. ?There's no details. They just say, ?we should look at this.'?

Munro also called for more action from the government.

?The position of the government has shifted in language, but not in action. While their language seems to indicate that they don't want it to completely die out, there's a critical mass that's necessary, whether it's horses, expertise, facilities. Sometimes half isn't good enough.?

Oak Ridges-Markham MPP Helena Jaczek wasn't so sure the future of horse racing in the province is so grim, noting the transition panel's job was to figure out the objectives that needed to be met in order for the industry to thrive.

?They came together and confirmed that the slots at racetracks program had to end, but they also recommended that the government guarantee at least 800 days of racing across the province,? Jaczek pointed out.

Jaczek said she understands the importance of the issue and that it was critical to set out a more sustainable model for horse racing in Ontario.

When asked whether or not the current direction the government is taking is a short-term fix, Jaczek wasn't convinced that was the case.

?No, I honestly don't think so,? she said. ?The intents that I heard are that the model had to be changed, but there's great interest in keeping the industry in Ontario and as I've said there is talk of new investors, possibly even overseas investors that are definitely interested in keeping the race tracks viable. That's kind of the message that we've heard anyway. It's not all doom and gloom.?

Leslie, although obviously not as optimistic as Jaczek, said some racing will happen at the tracks that have deals in place and revenue streams. But as time ticks down, she said the industry will continue to weaken.

?The problem is every day that we wait we're losing industry support. If they wait much longer there's not going to be any industry left to keep it going.
?The government moves so slowly that it's very discouraging right now for the horse racing industry getting so close to March 31. It's a scary thing ? people are losing everything; their income, their horses, their farms. They're losing their way of life.?
Leslie recommended the government put a pause on the OLG modernization plan until the situation gets figured out.
?I'm not saying she (Wynne) needs to stop it, but pause it and while they are in pause we need to sit down with the government and the horse racing industry and figure out how and what this revenue stream is going to be.
?Am I optimistic something is going to happen in 10 days? I can't say I'm optimistic, but we're trying like heck.?