

120 Westview Lane
Oak Ridge, TN 37830
August 8, 2020

Mr. Ron Woody
Roane County Executive
200 E. Race Street
Kingston, TN 37763

Dear Mr. Woody:

I am writing in regard to the proposed Motorsports Park, a.k.a “racetrack,” in Horizon Park on the western side of Oak Ridge in Roane County. The substance of this letter was initially communicated in a letter to the Mayor and City Council of Oak Ridge on March 10, 2020 and later to its IDB. While it is clear that this project is being handled by the city, it affects Roane County as well. If the city messes this up, it will be a Roane County mess as well. And that is what is about to happen.

This is personal to me because I live one mile from the proposed site. I am one of the closest residents to the project. It is literally an “in my back yard” issue for me and many of my neighbors in Westwood subdivision as well as Southwood and Forrest Creek. Since I can already hear gunfire from the DOE practice range in the vicinity of Bear Creek Road a greater distance away, you can understand my concern. One of the great virtues of Westwood for the 20 years I have lived here has been its peace and quiet. I am not in favor of a project that produces a “tolerable” level of noise when I relax on my porch nor one that burdens the Oak Ridge Turnpike with excessive tourist traffic.

I am fully in favor of increasing the tax base of Roane County in order to reduce the tax burden on residents by filling the industrial park with low emission, high wage manufacturing facilities. This project, however, is not the best choice for the park. If the project creates noise or traffic conditions that reduce property values it is detrimental. If it reduces the likelihood of future development near the track, the project could detract from future tax revenues more than enhance them. One sizeable development (Forrest Creek) is being revived across the turnpike from the proposed track and could be adversely affected. While I phrase all of these statements as “If,” the experiences of other communities who have had similar tracks constructed has been detrimental and conflict-ridden. There are often lawsuits filed against the tracks that also involve the municipalities. We don’t know exactly what will happen here because there is no adequate assessment of the impact of the racetrack.

I understand the attraction of turning unused industrial land into a taxable entity, but once devoted to one purpose, the county forsakes the possibility of using it for a more profitable one. Likewise, the planned use will influence the type of future development in the vicinity of the track. The planned industrial park could devolve into an entertainment complex with a water park, go-kart rides, mini golf, etc. once the industrial covenants in the original DOE land transfer are breached.

There are conditions in the deed from DOE to CROET that restrict the development of the property. Any development not meeting those conditions, or other restrictions, would be subject to legal challenges. An injunction while a challenge was in progress could cause a costly halt to construction in the middle of the project and additional expenses to the city, county and developer.

We know this proposal does not meet the existing legal restrictions imposed by the conveyance of the land from DOE regarding suitable use, environmental set asides, city ordinances, etc. The sale of the land has been made to the developer by the city's Industrial Development Board with a contingency that these restrictions must be lifted for the sale to be finalized. The developer is attempting to do that now.

The following observations and questions are ones I would like you to consider and address with the city, DOE, and the developer. This project should not proceed any further until these are adequately answered. Time is short because the DOE may decide on lifting its restrictions around Oct. 21, 2020.

1. Neither the city nor the county has made an assessment of the impact of lifting these restrictions including environmental and noise studies. Without such studies, you are giving the developer carte blanche to adversely impact our area.

Will you commit to doing these studies professionally before the developer asks the DOE to lift the restrictions?

2. The city has a noise ordinance. Right now there is no data available to determine if the track will satisfy the ordinance. We know from researching other similar tracks that noise is a problem at extended distances from a track. The developer has asserted that he did a noise study, but we know of no residents who were included in his "study" and no data from it was provided. It is a common experience of other communities that the developer promises no noise problems only for them to occur when the track is built. Abatement after the fact has not proven to be effective at other tracks and residents are stuck with an incurable problem caused by a lie. The track at the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, KY is a good example of this problem.

Will you commit to researching the experiences of cities and neighborhoods where similar tracks are located to insure that you are making an informed decision about the actual impact of the racetrack on its surroundings?

3. The land is designated for industrial use which inherently limits its noise level and traffic load as opposed to the proposed entertainment venue for races and large crowds.

Is the development compatible with the county's zoning ordinances and its master plan?

4. The 320 acre Horizon Park purchase is actually a set of separate parcels separated by green areas that are supposed to remain undeveloped. Those areas were set aside in the original sale in order to avoid doing a complete environmental impact study. They are a covenant with the community about how our land can be used. DOE should be held to its original promises.

Will you commit to requiring the developer to do a full environmental impact study about removing the protected areas prior to the completion of the sale of the land?

5. The Black Oak Ridge Conservation area (BORCE) adjoins the proposed racetrack. Noise and light pollution will adversely affect not only the trail users but also the wildlife in the BORCE.

Will you commit to investigating if there are BORCE restrictions or TWRA requirements that would affect the development? Will you require the developer to meet them?

6. It appears this development involves limited capital investment compared to siting multiple light manufacturing or research facilities on the 320 acres. Therefore, the racetrack will provide less property tax revenue to the city and the county.

Furthermore, the wage levels would be on the low end of the pay scale (grounds keepers, ticket takers, concession workers). The operation would be seasonal so many of these would not be year-round jobs and possibly not even full time. Wage rates and employment levels, sales revenue, and capital investment are all information a developer would need to plan the operation of the track and should be readily available at this point. No such information has been provided. The lack of this information is a signal to pause the project until it is provided. It looks like the county is buying a pig in a poke, although the pig does appear to be wearing lipstick.

Will you commit to getting the developer to supply more detailed information on his business plans so that you can determine the economic benefit in jobs, wages, and property and sales tax revenue relative to other potential businesses, e.g., industrial plants?

Will you commit to having an independent real estate service determine if the racetrack project meets the criteria of the “highest and best use of the property” to fulfill your fiduciary duty and maximize its return to the county? (Just because some revenue is better than none from unused land, does not make the proposed use a good one.)

7. There is significant citizen opposition to the racetrack. A group called Oak Ridgers for Responsible Development (OR4RD.org and OR4RD on Facebook) has been formed. It’s mission is to do research, inform the public, and lobby for proper analysis of the project. So far that research indicates the racetrack is indeed a pig in a poke. The city’s entities have been barely receptive to citizen input, especially the IDB, and seem to greatly favor the developer instead. This is just plain wrong.

Will you, as our elected representative, commit to working with the city to ensure the evaluation process provides both enough time and enough opportunity for citizens to fully express their desires about the racetrack?

8. The City of Oak Ridge does not have a stellar track record for managing development in the city. The several futile attempts at revitalizing the mall stand as proof. We need the county to bring its resources to bear on evaluating this project. An undercapitalized project that is abandoned partway through would make the land more difficult to sell than a vacant parcel. The developer’s description of the financing arrangement was intentionally very fuzzy in his presentation. Even the city mayor spoke to the council and implored them to understand who the investors really are. He was ignored. Please don’t let that slip by you.

Will you require the developer to report his sources and amounts of capital for the project?
Will you commit to assessing the financial condition of the developer to assure the project will be satisfactorily completed if it is undertaken?

9. There is no evidence the developer has conducted or submitted a marketing study to prove there is sufficient demand for the proposed project. Instead, it appears that it is a wishful case of “Build it and they will come.” His proposal suggested there would be interest in a track, but offered no quantitative study. Instead, it seems he arranged endorsements from a handful of racing enthusiasts, many of whom were not local residents.

Will you require the developer to submit a marketing study and financial projections to determine if the project is economically viable before completing the sale of the land?

10. Aside from generalities, the developer has not specified: the racing season, length of the track, number of races per week, times for races, number of cars per race, specific makes and models of cars racing, car modifications allowed (i.e., no muffler), noise restrictions, noise monitoring, noise abatement, and the number of spectators expected.

Will you commit to requiring such information before completing the sale?

11. Once all studies and analysis have been completed and a more comprehensive plan for the racetrack and its impact on residents and the environment has been submitted, will you require that there be sufficient time and opportunity for citizens to review and comment before the sale is completed? Along those lines, will you please erect a large sign at the entrance to Horizon Park saying “Future Site of Motorsports Park – Racetrack & Amphitheater” so residents know what is coming. If it’s a great idea, why not publicize it?

From all outward appearances, the city and its IDB have rushed headlong into an ill-advised and poorly researched land sale to an opportunistic developer. There has been insufficient analysis and inadequate citizen input on the part of the city. You, Mr. Woody, have the opportunity to be a counterbalance to this pending fiasco. All I am asking is that this be done the right way. I have an MBA and taught business to employees in major corporations for years. This proposal earns an “A” for sales pitch, a “D” for substance, and an “F” for its sensitivity to the community. It should be a “do over” for the developer.

This is a large and important project and it deserves a lot of attention. I hope these questions will aid you in working with the city and the developer. This is not a project to be pursued based on intuition, general assurances, and non quantified assertions. A good analysis will yield both a sound decision and public support for a project that stands on its demonstrated merits. In the long run, it will affect the property and sales tax revenues of the county. You, and we, have a huge stake in getting this right.

Thank you for your attention to these questions. Please acknowledge receipt of this letter.

Very truly yours,

Don Barkman
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