Motorsports Park Project: Tracking pro and con claims

troversial \$50 million Motorsports Park Project proposed last February by Rusty Bittle of Hardin

Valley Land Partners for the Horizon Center Industrial Park in western Oak Ridge has been much in the news lately. So, after reading The Oak Ridger and listening to numerous speakers, I'm trying to keep track (no pun intended) of the claims made pro and con.

The proponents include most members of the local **Industrial Development** Board, which is independent of Oak Ridge City Council and derives its authority from a state statute. The self-funded IDB decided Aug. 11 to sell three lots comprising 320 acres at Horizon Center to Bittle and his investment partners for the project. The parcels fall into two zoning categories (IND-1 and IND-2), neither of which includes "raceways" and "motorsports parks" in its short list of allowed legal uses in the contract IDB signed.

The proposed complex would include tracks for races of high-performance cars owned by out-oftown wealthy enthusiasts, motorcycles, electric cars, and other vehicles. It will have a music amphitheater, hotel, restaurant, conference center and motor home park. To make a profit, the investors will sell club memberships and rent facilities and tracks for use by rac-

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ing and research groups.

Claims for the project It will create jobs for trades people. It will attract tourists, racing fans, automotive conferences and training events, and really rich recreational racers who will patronize Oak Ridge restaurants and perhaps buy homes here. The motorsports park will increase the city's property tax revenues, perhaps by as much as \$500,000 a

Tracks for testing electric cars and self-driving vehicles might be of interest to insurance companies and government-funded transportation research groups, as well as Local Motors (Knox County) and Volkswagen (Chattanooga).

Claims against the project

The roar of racing vehicles may be unbearable to the affluent taxpayers living over a mile away (as happened to people living near the Monticello Raceway in New York, who then demanded sound barriers). The noise will lower the property values of the nearby Westwood and Forest Creek homes and reduce the residents' quality of life; multiple residents recall hearing the roar of races at the old **Atomic Motor Speedway** some eight miles away.

Because the raceways would be close to the popular greenways in the

undisturbed, pristine, natural forested landscape behind the Horizon Center, noise levels would annoy most greenway users, particularly birdwatchers. Moreover, because animals and birds communicate by sounds, racecar noises will drive the wildlife away from this 3,000-acre Black Oak Ridge Conservation Easement (BORCE), owned by the Department of Energy. Its greenways are used by thousands of middle-class folks each year for birding, hiking, nature walks, trail running and cycling events, highschool track team training runs, a fitness class and deer hunting.

The DOE's deals

In 1996, the DOE committed to protect natural areas where the raceway developer hopes to build tracks. Also, in 2003 the DOE made a solemn commitment to Tennesseans to compensate for its pollution of Watts Bar Lake last century by its plants' discharges of radionuclides, mercury and PCBs; as a result, fishing is banned in the lake. The agency created BORCE as a state natural area to provide recreation and enjoyment for Tennessee citizens.

The DOE would have to break the first commitment if it permits the developer to build tracks across the protected natural areas between the parcels IDB agreed to sell to Bittle's group. (If built, should the park be renamed the Horizontal Center?) Some of these areas have sinkholes,

which might not support a heavily used racetrack, and unless fenced off, deer and raccoons may run across tracks, causing racecar crashes and fatalities. Furthermore, the raceway noises and loss of corridors that allow birds, bats and salamanders to move between their habitats in the BORCE and the East Fork Poplar Creek floodplain would significantly reduce the recreational and ecological values the DOE got credit for by creating BORCE.

Full disclosure I enjoy the tranquility of living on the west end of town, so I will email a letter to City Council (citycouncil@oakridgetn.gov) opposing the rezoning of the Horizon Center parcels that is required for the project to race forward. I'd rather have a "Commerce Park West" with high-paying technology jobs there to boost the city's tax revenues. The IDB should work harder and smarter to bring the city light industry and research centers permitted by the present zoning.

If rezoning is approved and the DOE breaks its commitment, I hear it's

likely that a few citizens' groups might file a lawsuit against the DOE. I really don't know what will happen next; it's up to the DOE, Oak Ridge citizens and City Council. All I know right now is that the proposed uses for the land are illegal and that I value my serene life in my wooded neighborhood. Also, "racecar" is a palindrome — it's spelled the same, forwards or backwards!

Carolyn Krause is a longtime Oak Ridge resident who submits columns, stories and photos to The Oak Ridger for publication.









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