
Mayor hopes to bring Revolution to Revere

By Mark Arsenault

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REVERE — Mayor Dan Rizzo will try to acquire the Wonderland Greyhound Park property for the city in his casino negotiations with nearby Suffolk Downs, as the first piece of an ambitious plan to bring the New England Revolution professional soccer team to Revere.

“It’s a very important property to the future of the city of Revere,” said Rizzo, speaking of the shuttered dog racing track near Revere Beach. “It’s definitely something I’d like to see in play as we consider mitigation.”

Rizzo is negotiating mitigation payments with Suffolk Downs over plans to build a \$1 billion gambling resort at the thoroughbred track, which straddles the city line between East Boston and Revere. As the mayor of one of the host cities, Rizzo has tremendous leverage under state law to demand compensation from Suffolk Downs for accepting casino gambling in the community.

The partnership that owns Suffolk Downs also controls Wonderland, a 34-acre parcel entirely in Revere and assessed at about \$10.8 million, according to Suffolk Downs and city records.

Enter New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, who also owns the Revolution Major League Soccer team. Kraft has been looking for several years for an urban location to build a new soccer-specific stadium, with the intention of moving the Revolution from cavernous Gillette Stadium in suburban Foxborough. Kraft explored building in Somerville as recently as 2010.

The team has been talking with Rizzo about building at Wonderland if the city gets control of the land. “We are in discussions with the City of Revere, which offers the proximity to urban centers and access to transit that we are seeking for a future Revolution stadium, but talks are preliminary at this stage,” said New England Revolution president Brian Bilello, in a statement to the Globe.

Revolution games in 2012 have drawn an average of 13,281 fans, who tend to get swallowed up in an NFL football stadium that seats nearly 70,000. Team officials believe they could draw 20,000 a game in an urban area. Revere fits the bill as a densely populated community close to Boston, with the added attraction of a large number of immigrants from soccer-crazed Latin America and Brazil.

The city “has to be right in the wheelhouse in terms of soccer fans,” said Rizzo. “I’d love to see a full-blown professional soccer team here.”

The negotiations between Revere and Suffolk Downs could be another test of the clout of local officials under the state’s 2011 casino law.

Municipal officials have become extraordinarily powerful figures in the early months of the development of the Massachusetts casino industry. In Holyoke, for instance, Mayor Alex Morse was elected on an anticasinio platform and promptly persuaded Hard Rock International to give up plans for a gambling resort in the city. In Foxborough, the part-time Board of Selectmen stonewalled a casino proposal from Las Vegas billionaire Steve Wynn. When the May town election strengthened the anticasinio tilt of the board, Wynn gave up.

In Springfield, Mayor Domenic Sarno took the opposite path, by inviting gambling companies to his city. Sarno will have as many as four proposals from which to choose, as wealthy casino operators eagerly tailor their projects to fit the city’s every whim, in their rush to win Sarno’s favor.

Suffolk Downs, the only applicant to date for the sole casino resort license in Greater Boston, cannot complete its application to the state gambling commission until it reaches a negotiated deal with Rizzo on compensation. It must reach a separate agreement with Mayor Thomas M. Menino of Boston.

State Senator Stanley Rosenberg, an Amherst Democrat and one of the architects of the casino law, said lawmakers gave cities and towns leverage over developers to ensure that the communities are made whole for any negative effects from casino developments or for any added drain on services.

The compensation can come in just about any form: cash payments, new equipment, services, or local preferences in hiring. "We wanted to provide that flexibility," Rosenberg said.

Wonderland, a former dog racing and simulcast track, fell on hard times and closed in 2010, hurt by a state ban on live dog racing.

Suffolk Downs secured an option to buy Wonderland in 2008 and took title of the property last spring.

The owners are open to different options for redeveloping the parcel, said Chip Tuttle, chief operating officer for Suffolk Downs.

"We want to develop Wonderland in a manner that complements the ongoing revitalization of the Revere Beach area," Tuttle said. "We don't have specific plans for Wonderland yet." He said the negotiations with Revere are in their early stages and that the city has not yet asked for the property.

"That concept hasn't been broached," he said.

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