

Racing & Gaming Transcript – 5/6/2021

SPEAKERS

Jeff C., Steve Bulger, Andrew Jarosh, Tara Gaston, Bill Peck, Preston Allen, Sandy Winney, Benny Zlotnick, Several Supervisors

Benny Zlotnick

You can take that off if you're comfortable. We've had, I've had my shots, and I'm pretty sure we're more than six feet away from each other. Okay, most of the gang is here like to call this meeting to order. Welcome, everybody. Attendance has been taken and we do have a quorum. So our first item is the approval of the minutes of the February 4 meeting. I need a motion to do that.

Sandy Winney

I'll make that motion.

Benny Zlotnick

Thank you, Sandy.

Bill Peck

I'll make that motion. This is Supervisor Peck.

Benny Zlotnick

Thank you, Bill. All in favor?

Several Supervisors

Aye.

Benny Zlotnick

There we go. Thank you. Our guest this afternoon is Jeff Cannizzo. Oh, I got it right, thank you. He's a Senior Director of Government Affairs for NYRA. I've asked him to come today and just give us a little update or as much information as he can on what's happening at the track this summer. And if there's anything that we can do as a committee to help them out, so, Mr. Cannizzo the floor is yours.

Jeff C.

Thank you for having me here. On behalf of NYRA, we're happy that you have an interest in our interests, which is of course getting fans back to the track. The parameters have change by the day. Yesterday was the change for us from 48 hours ago, which was the day before, NYRA has been the I'm going to share with you everything that I know as of the minute. There's nothing formalized for Saratoga as we speak, because we're literally working with the Governor's office on what that may or may not be, which, again, has changed twice in the last 48 hours. But NYRA is lumped under general, large sporting venues for State guidance. So this would include major league baseball stadiums, etc, which is

where a lot of the news I'm sure you've been reading about is coming forward with the Yankees and Mets in the last 24 hours. But we were given guidance under to be included in large scale sporting venues, this past month, of which we were able to reopen Belmont Park recently, as of this past Saturday for the Kentucky Derby. And then Sunday, and then today. So technically today's the third day of racing being open to fans in New York State. We've put in place guidelines that correspond with state sporting venues, which is for testing and vaccinations and pre purchasing of reserved seats. That is very complicated to do so with racetracks, because I think everyone probably knows in this room and on this call, racetracks technically aren't sporting stadiums, per se. Yes, there's stadium aspects to them, if you include and look at box seating and different dining options that the tracks have. But as you know, there's general admission that makes up a racing venue. And that's different than sporting. So we're trying to figure out how we fit into that and what the Governor's office was like us to do with general admission or what we can do with general admission, in addition to the other aspects of the track. And that's what makes Saratoga a complicated animal is that it's a combination of all of these different sporting venue guidelines that technically don't fall into the current large scale, Yankee Stadium style sporting venue. So we're working on those details. Literally as we speak. Our goal is to get that done, ASAP. And we're working with DOH to give us that guidance to do that. Every day that we go by as you know is a day that our dollar that potentially could take away from tourism here. So it's in our interest as it is in everyone else's interest in the County to get that announcement out as soon as possible. So we're yesterday the governor's office, wait let me take a step back. Last week, for Saturday that we opened up for the Kentucky Derby and currently through May 19, we can accommodate up to 33% capacity, for example, at Belmont Park, based on vaccinations and testing requirements, which would also include social distancing. And then the announcement yesterday was that after May 19, all sporting venues could go up to 100% of capacity based on vaccination and separation of those vaccinated versus those unvaccinated. And we're still trying to determine if those unvaccinated have testing requirements or not, because it was stated, verbally, that they would not during that conference and announcement. However, there is a separation of them. But the good news is that the capacity numbers maximum based on vaccinations, which is what everyone in the State is moving towards. So we're trying to see how that fits into what could be applied to Saratoga, in terms of capacity, in terms of vaccination requirements. There's announcements made based on full vaccination requirements indicating capacity, which very well could be requirements for general admission. We're trying to figure those out. And there's clearly a lot of movement dynamics with this. Our goal is to get it done as soon as possible so we can announce, you know, and go on sale for seating, which obviously helps everyone in the community, including us, again, evaluate how we fit into that. And it's literally can tell you at the top level right now, in terms of deciding how we can move forward with Saratoga, specifically for the race course. I probably answered a few things. And it probably created a lot more questions with that. But that's really the main update on the situation. You know, the takeaways are that we will have as at Saratoga, for sure. How we get to a number of capacity is the question and what requirements are placed on those people or fans that are going to come it remains to be seen in and again, hopefully, in a matter of days, hopefully, we have those answers, and we can go immediately on sale for it. I'm hoping that it doesn't take, weeks, but we're trying to work on it by the minute.

Benny Zlotnick

Okay, thank you. I have a couple of questions. Part of the atmosphere of Saratoga is the picnic tables and the grounds. How does that figure into square footage or attendance? Or what are they going to do there?

Jeff C.

That's the million dollar question with general admission. Because those waiting tables are general admission seating the back of the backyard. So we're trying to get the backyard defined and that is the key. I mean the reserved seating for the courthouse grandstand, boxes, the New 1863 Club that technically is already defined. It's the backyard, which is really the key to what we're talking about. 5000 plus people in those picnic tables, and then if you expand beyond those picnic tables, to just general admission of people that are bringing lawn chairs or just coming to standard reveal that they have to be there has to be defined how we're going to or how we can or can't accommodate them. So that those areas are the ones we're looking for definition on. Because we obviously want to be able to include them in some capacity.

Benny Zlotnick

Have they given you any guidelines as to if they're looking for fully vaccinated, you know, how that might affect the backyard as you're calling it.

Jeff C.

So, according to what was announced yesterday, fully vaccinated venues can have 100% capacity.

Benny Zlotnick

That would be good.

Jeff C.

So you can take that and consider what that now that that is an option to be considered, is a fully vaccinated venue with 100% capacity. Everyone comes to the door that is validated or vaccinated, which eliminates testing requirements, and eliminates a lot of complexities to this. But that's a decision that will come from the Governor's office themselves and the Department of Health, too if that is an option. But it was a question that was raised with sporting venues yesterday, and if that was possible or not, but it's something that is on the table for all sporting venues. I think we're gonna see or hear an answer shortly on what that may or may not be.

Benny Zlotnick

Yeah, I know a lot of this stuff is still up in the air, but have they made any decision or are they leading towards a decision on people who have one vaccine or have decided that for whatever reason they're not going to be vaccinated? Will those people still be allowed to come in but in a different a separate area or how would you do that?

Jeff C.

Yeah. So that's, another part of question two is that if you're going fully vaccinated, there is no unvaccinated people. It's fully vaccinated or you're not permitted on the grounds. The only other option would be vaccinated areas. And then there's a unvaccinated section. But again, that would work with

non racetrack environments, because of what the term that the State has given. We've worked with state called self mobilization, meaning I come through the door, there's no at Saratoga there, the policing mechanism for somebody that's unvaccinated is really next to impossible. That's walking around that, yeah, they might have bought a general admission ticket to go in a closed separate area. How do you prevent that fully prevent that securely and safely prevent that from commingling or self mobilizing in areas that are fully vaccinated. And that's the fundamental problem with having full vaccination or partial vaccination with closed off areas that are not vaccinated. And that's what we're really going to do.

Bill Peck

This is Supervisor Peck and I have a question.

Benny Zlotnick

Certainly.

Bill Peck

Thank you for being here today. And I apologize, I'm not there in person. But obviously, this is changing by the day, and it's in the best interest of Saratoga County and the State of New York to get as many people at these racing venues as possible. In Belmont, right now for the backstretch trainers, walkers, exercise riders, owners, does the State have any requirements, that they have to be vaccinated, or how are you handling the back stretch, folks?

Jeff C.

Our back stretch community actually is vaccinated. So that's how we've gone to the utmost degree of vaccinating them in our entire community. And that's what makes it, you know, safe and unique for us is that we've taken that course last year, which is how we were allowed to have racing and operate. So from last year, pre vaccination through this cycle, we've taken the approach of vaccinating as many people as possible, which eliminates, obviously, a lot of the other requirements. And from a safety perspective, it makes it a safe environment. So the last figure I knew we were literally almost at 100% of the backstretch community, New York's backstrokes community being vaccinated and those coming into the community replacing those same requirements.

Bill Peck

Excellent. Is there anything that Saratoga County can assist you as far as a lobbying effort, or is it I'm assuming discussions, when you say are going at the highest level, you're dealing directly with the Governor's office and second floor. And it is best for us to stay out of the way at this point?

Jeff C.

That's correct. I think that ultimately, we're going to receive, I guess it's going to come down to the timeliness of our answer. If we can get an answer about the backyard general admission vaccination or not really everything I've stated in what I consider a timely manner, meaning before the May 19 timeline, I think that's sufficient to go forward with if we get to a position that May 19th rolls around, and we're still uncertain, that it becomes some risks to the community, to the counties to capitol region. And

that's certainly where any support you can offer would be helpful. So I think it comes down to a date, that's realistically, a week or two away.

Benny Zlotnick

Drew, you don't mind me putting you on the spot for a second, Hit the button so we can hear you, but can you give us a rough idea of what the economic impact was last year to not having the track open? Not just sales tax, but you know, just money that came would have come into the County or Saratoga in the city that we didn't see last year?

Andrew Jarosh

Obviously, I don't have data in front of me.

Benny Zlotnick

I apologize for that.

Andrew Jarosh

No, no, no problem at all. This is Drew Jarosh, County Treasurer. Thank you for being here. There's certainly evidence that we could point to that it was a significant impact. I mean, to say the least, most of which I look at our occupancy of our hotel industry that was obviously near zero for most of the summer, which is usually the highest point of the curve a year. The economic impact I know several years ago, there was a study that says that horse race in Saratoga County contributes over \$30 billion from everything from the horse farms in other outside parts of the County all the way through the hotel industry in the restaurants and everything else. So it all filters out, there's a big study done, I want to say more than 10 years ago. So that's a massive impact. Our sales tax did not drop as much as I expected a year ago, today. A year ago today, I sat down with a number of people here at the county, and the catastrophic impact of our sales tax projection. And we were trying to figure out how to survive that. We ended up only down about 4%, which I would take that any day of the week. So that's partly because people were not spending money. And if you should see, the 2020s internet sales tax was through the roof, right. So there's some take and some give, depending on the economy. The one thing about our consumers is that people adapt to whatever the situation is. But mostly it was our hospitality industry was absolutely decimated. I know nationwide figures are coming out now from the National Bureau of Economic Statistics that up to 20% of any business 20 to 30% of any business that closed during the pandemic is not going to reopen. I have no reason to believe that that number is going to be you know that we are immune from that here in Saratoga County. I think we're already hearing anecdotal stories on that. Like I said, there's not evidence yet. I think there will be. I think NYSAC is working on certain studies. There are some economic development agencies here in the County that are looking at similar studies. But it's definitely not going to be, we certainly were not unaffected, put it that way. There's going to be a significant effect. And it's going to be in a lot of ways some heart breaking stories, as well as the financial impact that it's going to take us years to recover. You know, even with the distancing and everything else, there's still the question of, let's say, they open up tomorrow, how many people are actually going to go back to normal, especially in this area, right? Some percentage of the population is still going to be reserved, to go stay at a hotel to go to one large, crowded venue. So there's that aspect to that the economic impact is more of a social change that we've had, it's going to have an economic impact. It's not just the shutdown that we did for a year. So

there's a lot to question, Chairman, and I'll be happy to talk about anecdotally, over the next hour. But I think over the next several months, we'll start seeing some of the agencies that have the resources and are focused on that kind of data that will come out with that data. And as soon as I get my hands on it I will gladly forward it.

Benny Zlotnick

Great. Thank you very much. Anybody else on the phone?

Bill Peck

Just one more comment to you as Chair of this committee, Benny, I would suggest and if that was, Administrator Bulger, then this is for him as well, I would suggest that a letter from the Chair of the board, I don't think we need a resolution. And I think that's probably too slow. I think probably a recommendation from this committee with a letter going to the State, just encouraging them that it's important for the planning and put some nice language in there planning for not only NYRA but the greater Saratoga community, that the sooner than later answer to the NYRA's questions as far as what capacity is going to be allowable so that people can start planning their summers. The letter from the Chairman of the Board on behalf of Saratoga County should just go along out of this committee.

Benny Zlotnick

Okay, I will make that I'll send that email out later this afternoon or tomorrow morning to our Chairman and our Administrator asking for a little push in that direction. Anybody else?

Steve Bulger

Chairman Zlotnick, this is Steve Bulger just for two quick things if I could. Jeffrey, thanks for coming today, really appreciate it. First, I just want to put this out there as you get closer to opening day and in the you know your workers rolling in especially the backstretch, if you do have a situation where you need some people vaccinated, please feel free to reach out to us, our Public Health Department. We're already working with the Racino. We're working with the Harness Track. We'd be happy do the same if there is any group of your workers that need to be vaccinated on short notice. We'll be happy to take care and afford it. Now, the second thing is, and this is more of a heads up, you might already be seeing it down in Belmont. But we're experiencing an awful worker shortage right now, over the last six to eight weeks. We have 1000s of jobs here in the county that are open, and people just aren't applying for them. So we're not exactly sure what caused all of it. Part of it is the Federal Unemployment money that's floating around that out there. So maybe by July, that'll be a little bit of a better situation. But I just want to put that on your radar and find out if you're seeing that in Belmont, or even up here yet so far.

Jeff C.

Good question. So the first part of that was the vaccine. Thank you, that will certainly be helpful knowing that going forward too. I think that, you know, the vaccinations are going to be critically important to all of the reopening that we're doing. You know, there's, I think there's things that NYRA would certainly like to partner with the County on offering vaccination. Some of yesterday's announcement with Major League Baseball, both venues are offering on site vaccinations for potential fans, with the carrot that they receive free admission for a later date. NYRA is looking into the possibility

of doing something similar so it would be great to be able to partner with the County on something like that. So there might be an opportunity there. I want to mention that. And to the second point about employment, I'm not surprised to hear that it's, I think that's clearly a statewide issue for sure, multinational issue but the statewide issue that we're seeing. With our, because we're such a niche industry, and, because of the community that exists that works with within horse racing, we haven't identified or seen an employee shrinkage based on the pandemic itself. Based on other issues, yes. But from the last year of dealing with COVID I can't say that there is necessarily a coalition for us because of the aspect of what we do and how it's such a niche sport, and those that work in it, typically stay in employed in it. But there are certainly other factors that that are hindering employment for our sport but that's for a different time.

Benny Zlotnick

Yes, ma'am.

Tara Gaston

Thank you. Hi, Supervisor Gaston, City of Saratoga Springs and the Chair of the Health Committee at this time. We actually as a Health Committee and the Public Health Department has already reached out to NYRA and to the backstretch. Who is providing vaccinations? It's all outside of NYRA, right?

Jeff C.

Well, we have both our tracks downstate were vaccination locations. So they were getting vaccinated right on the track. But it's outside of the NYRA itself. NYRA, as an organization, we weren't doing the vaccinations, but they were outside.

Tara Gaston

My understanding is that NYRA is a registered vaccinator. So I wasn't sure if NYRA was doing it or not. And we've already spoken to the Governor's office about providing pop ups and vaccinations for both the staff and the public. Once we have more clarity on the timeline of who's going to be allowed and whatnot, so those things are certainly already in the works and we're happy to work to make sure that everybody is safe. You were mentioning earlier about vaccinating of staff in the backstretch. I know that they're often individuals who come in and out throughout the season are they're going to be required to be vaccinated prior to returning or prior to coming onto the site?

Jeff C.

They're gonna have the same protocols we had in place we've had in place on the backstretch too. So there's, in order to be on the backstretch, you actually have to show with your, no one can just walk on the backstretch. You have to be licensed, and with identification. On those identifications, we're actually labeling who's vaccinated in addition to your passport or card, as well as tested so there's testing requirements to in place that we have Covid testing. That backstretch community, the rules and guidance behind those employees are evolving and changing with the guidance that we're about to receive as well. Such as who has to be vaccinated. From that perspective, so we're expecting changes to from DOJ in the state.

Tara Gaston

So just to be clear at this time, they don't have to be vaccinated to be on site and on the backstretch.

Jeff C.

You have to be vaccinated or proper testing.

Tara Gaston

What is proper testing?

Jeff C.

So we're testing on a weekly basis. So for those that aren't, but like, my point, our back stretch community is virtually almost 100% vaccinated itself, based on the time we started the vaccination process in January with them.

Tara Gaston

In Saratoga?

Jeff C.

Downstate. And Aqueduct.

Benny Zlotnick

Anybody else? All right, hearing none. Thank you very much for your time, sir. And if there's anything else we can do over the course of the next few weeks or the summer, please reach out to us and we'll be more than happy to do what we can at our level here. Thank you for your time. Thank you. Any other business? Seeing none, take a motion to adjourn.

Sandy Winney

I'll make that motion then.

Benny Zlotnick

Thank you, Sandy. Second.

Preston Allen

I'm second it.

Benny Zlotnick

Supervisor Allen. Okay, great. All in favor.

Several Supervisors

Aye.

Benny Zlotnick

Thank you, everyone. Have a good day.