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Southland Gaming Aims to Bring Carnival Vibes to Clinton E. Phipps Racetrack as Temporary Promoter; November Races Announced

Southland Gaming, selected as temporary promoter, plans to transform race day into a lively event with entertainment and family-friendly attractions. With 80% of construction complete, the next race is set for November 3, 2024

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ST. THOMAS — A meeting of the St. Thomas/St. John Horse Racing Commission resulted in the selection of Southland Gaming as a temporary promoter for the Clinton E. Phipps Racetrack on St. Thomas. Officials also announced the first Sunday in November as the next race day.

“We have determined the next race day will be November 3, and we’re very excited about that,” said Shaine Gaspard, Southland Gaming’s chief operating officer. “We’re also looking for another race day in December.”

Southland Gaming representative David Edmonds also provided commissioners with an update on construction progress at the track. The buildings that had been conditionally certified for use for the May races – grandstand, jockey locker room, and others – have now received final certificates of occupancy. Other key buildings, including the pony barn and equipment storage building, have been approved by permitting agencies. “As of today, we are essentially 80% complete with the entire project, which is well under our expected time frame,” Mr. Edmonds said. At this pace, Southland Gaming, originally expected to complete half the project within two years, may actually finish the entire construction by the two-year deadline.

“In early 2025, landscaping will be the final item we complete,” Mr. Edmonds projected.

After a brief discussion on the logistics of temporary stabling for horses while the main barn is being rehabilitated, commissioners turned to the question of who would be selected as a temporary promoter for the track. HRC Chair Hugo Hodge Jr. disclosed that three proposals had come in – one from Southland Gaming, another from one of the horsemen associations, and the third from a private citizen.

“After reviewing all the submissions and recognizing what’s been taking place for the last few months, as to how it’s been run...I move that Southland Gaming be granted the temporary promotership of the Clinton E. Phipps racetrack,” board member Sheldon Turnbull offered. His motion, which was unanimously approved, was amended to include a requirement that the company “meet with the horse owners and have that conversation,” as Mr. Hodge put it. Mr. Turnbull also stipulated that Southland Gaming submit a “tentative schedule of races,” and commit to a minimum of one race each month, once “there’s no oddities of nature or otherwise to restrict such.”

Issues such as availability of veterinary services have been smoothed over, commissioners noted, with an equine veterinarian based in the British Virgin Islands being tapped to provide support on an as-needed basis.

Commission board members also discussed the progress being made with the process of finding a permanent promoter for races at the Clinton E. Phipps track. “There has been a lot of work that’s gone into the RFQ, said board member Laura Palminteri. The goal is “to try and get applicants that have experience in the field, experience with – ideally with horse racings, but if not with major event promotions, and to see that we can get the expertise needed to make this successful,” she explained.

After the vote in Southland Gaming’s favor for temporary promotership, Mr. Gaspard noted that hosting a successful event “is not just about building a race track and offering purse money,” but actually depends on “transforming the event into a premier social occasion that everybody feels compelled to attend.” He says that as a promoter, Southland Gaming is interested in attracting a diverse crowd of not just the horse enthusiast community, but a broader sample of the Virgin Islands population. “That’s what’s essential to make that day a fun day and a family day,” he declared, describing attractions including live bands, DJ, and the food vendors that will help “create a carnival-like atmosphere” of fun and festivities.