

## Racetrack at Robber's Corners

As Massachusetts gets into the casino game and Rhode Island sees more of the down side of gambling's empty promises, who recalls the narrow escape Exeter had from hosting a race track? Sixty-three years ago the town barely avoided the establishment of a harness track that dramatically would have changed the quiet rural character that our residents cherish. This is how the story unfolded as reported in news articles in the Providence Journal in 1952.



Early in January, two land owners came before the Town Council asking for a permit to build a racetrack on land straddling the border of Exeter and North Kingstown on Route 2 just south of the junction with Route 102, a place known locally as "Robbers Corners." The sponsors of the proposal were described as "well known and highly respected citizens of Rhode Island" who anticipated an investment of up to two million dollars and a sizeable tax assessment for Exeter. The Council was unsure of who held the legal responsibility for authorizing such an endeavor – the State or

local government. So they voted to turn the request over to the Industries Inducement Committee (IIC), a special group created by the Council a year earlier. The Committee was directed to hold a public hearing and issue a report on the matter for the Council to consider. The IIC immediately set to work and scheduled a public hearing in February. At this point the U.S. Trotting Association, the licensing organization for owners, drivers, trainers, and horses at racetracks throughout the country, had not been contacted by anyone in Rhode Island.

On February 4<sup>th</sup> about fifty persons gathered at the Town Clerks office for the hearing. This was more than could be seated in the building so windows were opened for those standing outside in the cold. Most of those attending objected to the proposal and wanted to know more details. Was the financial backing real? How big would the facility be? Who were the sponsors of the proposal? What impact would it have on local traffic? Opponents from the Exeter Parent Teacher Association, Rhode Island Baptist Camps, the North Kingstown High School PTA, and the North Kingstown Ministers' Association argued that tax revenue wouldn't justify the harm to Exeter's rural character. Abutting landowners said the project would lessen their property values and cause traffic congestion. They questioned the character of unknown sponsors and other uncertainties about the project. The sponsor's attorney countered that the track, now called Exeter Raceway, Inc., would nearly double the town's real estate valuation and generate \$46,000 in taxes. He was unwilling to be more specific about the financial backing and the size of the track.

The Town Council now had a decision to make, but that was complicated by a bill before the General Assembly requiring racetrack petitions to be decided by referendum. Unsure if the vote could be

delayed until November to avoid the trouble of a special election, the Council voted to hold a local referendum, but did not set a date. Even if the local referendum passed, the State Racing and Athletic Commission would be the body ultimately granting approval.

At the Statehouse, the referendum bill passed in the House and had the support of the Governor. In the Senate, however, its progress bogged down. The Senate version would create an approval process involving both the local council and the voters. To establish a racetrack, an application first would have to receive council approval, then 15 percent of voters would have to agree to place the question on a ballot at the next general election, and finally the proposal would have to receive a two-thirds affirmative vote. If it passed every requirement, the proposal then would be acted on by the local council. The bill had two other provisions: first, local communities could levy a fee or tax on the racetrack and second, the existing requirement for license renewal every ten years would be dropped. Some senators were not satisfied with this bill. An amendment that would allow a council to override a local vote in favor of a track was offered and defeated. The Republicans wanted to bind councils to the voters' choice while Democrats who proposed the amendment wanted to keep more control over the proliferation of new racetracks. Another motion was made to send the bill back to committee because it had no provisions for local control over a track once approved. That too was defeated and by a straight party vote. No bill would have affected the two existing racetracks, but legislators were worried about expanding the gambling industry too far.

As debate carried on in the General Assembly, the Providence Journal printed a strongly-worded editorial on February 6<sup>th</sup> against *"another big-time legalized gambling operation in Rhode Island"* that was consistent with its long time opposition to the sport of horse racing and pari-mutuel betting. The editorial said that these operations make promises of profits but that the public really loses more than it gains. In this particular case, the voters of Exeter were being asked to approve a proposal *"shrouded in mystery and uncertainty"* because the promoters were unable or unwilling to answer their important questions. Optimistically, the writer concludes that *"unless they've changed mightily, the hard-headed people of Exeter know better than to accept that kind of deal."*

Things went quiet in the newspaper for several months. In April the Exeter Raceways promoters suggested that one year's taxes would be paid to the Town in advance contingent on the Council issuing a permit and the State approving enough racing dates to be profitable. Someone calculated the amount at \$20,000. But there was no official offer to the Council and in fact the Exeter Raceways directors hadn't raised the money or even discussed a plan to do so. Like so much of the other information about the proposal, this was more rumor than fact. Unswayed by this backdoor attempt to influence its deliberations, the Council held to its earlier decision for a referendum, although circumstances might change depending on the outcome of legislation in the General Assembly.

Opponents were not resting. A taxpayers committee formed and in May challenged the promoters to answer several crucial questions. They wanted to know why the matter had not been taken to the North Kingstown Town Council since the site of the proposed track was on land in both towns. Why hadn't the exact location been clearly defined? There were questions about one particular promoter

who had signed the original application but was neither an officer of Exeter Raceways nor had ever appeared at public Council meetings concerning the racetrack. The group wanted to know why information was so hard to get and why the voters were being asked to make an uninformed vote. They pledged to begin sending letters to Exeter voters in opposition to the track before the June 7<sup>th</sup> date the Council had set for the referendum.

The day before the vote the Providence Journal printed another editorial in opposition to the proposal. It warned that an affirmative vote would irrevocably surrender control of the racetrack to the State Commission on Racing and Athletics. The Town Council would have to comply with the outcome and there was no way to rescind a permit once granted. The editorial cited what happened in the town of Agawam, Massachusetts, about fifteen years earlier as an example of a bad decision. When the town approved a racetrack on the promise of jobs for local residents, business growth, and lower taxes, it got unruly crowds, noise, and criminal activities instead. Agawam was able to expel the track a few years later thanks to provisions in Massachusetts law. Exeter would have no such ability. Community concerns would take second place to the operator's interests.

The president of Exeter Raceways was not happy with the editorial and particularly with the example of Agawam. Many businesses had difficulty during the Depression years, he said. Despite demands for more information, he still refused to comment on the financial arrangements and the rumored tax advance. As for the vote the next day, he still was confident of victory but in the face of growing opposition, thought the outcome would be closer than the 4 to 1 approval he once had predicted.

On referendum day the voters turned out in record numbers with 71.2% of those eligible to vote showing up at the polls. Both sides had predicted victory but when the last vote was counted the proposal had lost by just nine votes. There had been a last minute controversy when the Board of Canvassers had added 16 voters who owned property but did not live in town. They were required to sign affidavits of eligibility that could impose criminal penalties if falsely sworn. The six-month struggle over the issue had caused bitter feelings. Townspeople were split over the promises and threats to the way of life in town.

Looking back now over a span of more than sixty years, we can only guess what Exeter might be like had the vote gone the other way. Harness racing no longer exists in Rhode Island and former racetracks have either disappeared or been converted to a larger, more intrusive gambling venue. If the latter case had happened here, Routes 102 and 2 certainly would carry a lot more traffic and the surrounding housing patterns would be very different. It's likely there would be more businesses in town, but the rural character so highly prized would be gone from the eastern end. Taxes would not be lower; they never are because the demand for more services grows. And gambling establishments bring in far more out-of-town workers than locals. When a casino in West Greenwich was proposed in 1994, Exeter voters turned it down in the statewide referendum and stayed true to preserving what we value. We can look back and be thankful that the Exeter "hard-heads" of 1952 didn't take the bait.

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Photo source: Harness Racing at Roger Williams Park, Providence Public Library Rhode Island Image Collection, item gc 1731. <http://www.provlib.org/roger-williams-park/harness-racing-roger-williams-park>

Information source: Providence Journal articles of Jan 8, Jan 9, Jan 10, Feb 5, Feb 6, Apr 11, May 7, Jun 6, and Jun 8, 1952

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