

Panel proposed to guide harness racing



Horses running on Sunday, the first day of the season, at Saratoga Casino Hotel's harness racing track.

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. >> The state has launched a new initiative to promote New York harness racing and highlight its importance to agriculture.

Saratoga Casino Hotel's harness track is one of seven in New York state that support thousands of jobs, help preserve farmland and contribute to rural economies.

State agriculture Commissioner Richard Ball has called for creation of an advisory working group, comprised of racing stakeholders, to guide the industry moving forward.

"It's a good thing just getting people together so these things can be addressed," said Betty Holt, Harness Horse Breeders of New York executive director. "Any kind of attention or commitment to protect breeding and racing is good."

However, Ball's announcement follows the state's controversial naming of a new firm to run the lucrative New York Sire Stakes program, which rewards winning New York-bred horses.

The Sire Stakes is technically administered by a state entity, the Agriculture and New York State Horse Breeding Development Fund.

However, the Latham-based Harness Horse Breeders has had contracts to run the program, along with related marketing and promotion efforts, since its inception 50 years ago.

Recently, Albany-based Capitol Hill Management Services was selected to replace the Harness Horse Breeders, in response to a request for proposals from the New York Gaming Commission.

This was the first year the contract had ever been put out to bid.

Several horsemen, including long-time owner and breeder Paul Kelley, of Gansevoort, objected to the move in a letter to state officials.

Kelley questioned Capitol Hill's experience and its president John Graziano Jr.'s role as a registered political lobbyist.

"We're really concerned that they're bringing in people with no background to administer the program," Kelley said. "They just came out of nowhere. They lack the experience of running a program like this."

Graziano could not immediately be reached for comment.

The Harness Horse Breeders managed the Sire Stakes program for many years, under contract as a sole-source provider, but had no legal authority, Gaming Commission spokesman Lee Park said.

Under state law, a sole-source contract could not be continued, so it was decided to put management, marketing and promotion of the Sire Stakes out to bid.

Capitol Hill submitted the lower price, about one-third the figure submitted by Harness Horse Breeders.

Capitol Hill's bid was unanimously approved by Development Fund representatives and staff, Park said.

Ball said members of the new advisory group will be announced in the coming weeks. A similar effort will also be considered for the state's thoroughbred breeders, he said.