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No hoofs, hounds at Anthony Downs

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ANTHONY - There will be no horse or dog races of any kind this summer at Anthony Downs, ending a tradition that dates to 1904, according to Dan Bird, president of the Anthony Fair Association board, which met Thursday.

Financial reasons killed racing for 2010, but Bird said the board hopes funding through the state will be available for a return in 2011.

The demise was not a surprise. Last year, those attending six days of races at the 105th event, scheduled over two weekends in July, knew they were witnessing a potentially sad milestone after organizers were warned there was no state funding available for 2010.

"It's not something that we want to lose," said Gwen Warner, executive director of the Anthony Chamber of Commerce. "It's just a part of us; it's a part of what we do here."

Harper County Economic Development and Harper County offered \$50,000, Warner said. But that was contingent on the rest of the money being available. Bird said the July event required \$150,000 to \$200,000, and the shutdown of racetracks in Kansas City, Wichita and Frontenac snuffed out a state revenue source for Anthony Downs.

Bird hopes the Kansas Legislature can take action to help Anthony Downs but is not counting on that to save the 2010 season.

"We're hoping in 2011 we can do our 106th; it just won't be consecutive," he said.

Using a multiplier of four and including the purse money, the economic impact of racing at Anthony cast a total benefit of \$800,000 to \$1 million, Bird said.

"It just blows people's mind. And they're going to miss it," Bird said.

Warner said local motel rooms filled a month to six weeks ahead of the races, as people arrived to prepare for the races. After Harper County motels were booked, people found rooms in Wichita, Wellington and Medicine Lodge during the racing weekends, driving back and forth each day, Warner said. Those drawn to the races also shopped, ate and filled their vehicle gas tanks in Harper County, a boost for retailers.

"It has a pretty good economic impact on the entire county," Warner said.

Bird did not sound overly optimistic about the prospects for securing state funding for 2011, nor did Mike Deines, director of communications for the Kansas Racing and Gaming Commission.

Deines noted a gaming-related bill made it through a Senate committee that would change some of the financial terms for the racetracks that have slot machines. If the bill was passed and enacted, and the larger racetracks, such as Wichita Greyhound Park and The Woodlands in Kansas City reopened, that would start funneling money into the fund that would help smaller tracks, such as Anthony Downs.

"That would be really the only thing," Deines said, "because the money set aside to help tracks like Anthony comes from simulcast wagering money at the larger tracks. That's not happening; there really isn't money being put into that fund at all."

The Legislature is conducting its wrap-up session now, and lawmakers are focused on producing a state budget for the fiscal year starting July 1.

"It's really frustrating. We're just doing this for economic development," said Bird, noting that the Anthony Fair Association board members are volunteers.