

Markham council narrowly defeats off-track betting proposal

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

All bets are off — at least temporarily — for off-track betting on Markham Main Street after council narrowly passed a resolution Tuesday night opposing the proposal.

Reacting with disbelief and outrage were the two co-owners of Heritage Champions, who say they have already pumped \$400,000 into the Markham Village Lanes site and followed every rule in the book.

"We have put in every penny we have — we signed a 20-year lease. We have 40 televisions there, we were supposed to open this weekend," said an upset Leslie Patterson after the vote. She co-owns the business with Bradford councillor Marty Toombs.

"We did everything right. We got the approvals for zoning, approvals from the two local councillors, approval from the BIA — how can they do this months later? It's sheer audacity."

While council has no legal authority to stop the opening, it has advised the Ontario Racing Commission it objects and requested it deny Heritage Champions an operating licence.

The commission must now decide its next move — issue the licence despite town objections or deny the licence application, effectively destroying the fledgling business.

"We have never had an application before the commission that did not have municipal approval," Ontario Racing Commission executive director Jean Major said. "That is one of the requirements; it's not a legal requirement, but it's part of our policy."

A dozen people were at council in support of the plan, although many councillors say they have

received nothing but negative comments from residents worried about the type of clientele such a business would attract, as well as parking and traffic concerns.

And sparks flew between Cousens and Toombs, who accused each other of lying and making legal threats in a private meeting last week.

Tuesday, Toombs said he couldn't believe council was taking this position at the 11th hour. He maintained his upscale establishment would attract more people to Main Street and provide 30 jobs.

"I'm the guy who invested the money and for you to come in at the 11th hour and turn my life upside down, take time away from my family in the fact I'm here tonight, when we have done nothing wrong, I take objection to that," he said.

David Gorman of the Ontario Jockey Club, which collects the wagering revenue from the GTAs off-track betting parlours, also seemed stunned.

"This is the first time we have encountered a situation like this — we have never encountered municipal objection," Gorman told council. "I'm not sure what we're doing here — entrepreneurs who want to open a new business are generally welcomed with open arms."

Councillors Joe Virgilio, David Allison and Tony Wong all expressed concern about objecting to the business at this late date considering everything the owners have gone through — especially in Markham, a town that prides itself on being open, helpful and business-friendly.

The motion opposing the proposal, drafted by Cousens, passed by a six-to-four margin, with Heath, Virgilio, Allison and Wong voting against it. McKelvey supported it, effectively withdrawing his original approval.

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